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WOMEN IN CULTURAL CAPTIVITY

British Women and the Zenana Mission*

Karen E. Smith

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- *Karen Smith is a tutor in church history and spirituality, South Wales Baptist College and the University of Cardiff, Wales, United Kingdom*
 - *British women set up the Zenana Mission to take the gospel to the women of India since male missionaries could not penetrate the women's quarters. Through this work the British women began to break out of their own rather different but real cultural captivity.*
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In a little pamphlet outlining the work of two British Baptist women, *Marianne Lewis and Elizabeth Sale, Pioneers of Missionary Work Among Women*, Ernest Payne remarked that 1792 was not only the year that William Carey wrote his *Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen*,¹ which would result in the formation of the Particular Baptist Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Amongst the Heathen (later known as the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS)), but it was also the year that Mary Wollstonecraft² published her remarkable and prophetic pamphlet, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*.³ At first glance perhaps these two individuals have little in common with one another: Carey, a British

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Baptist minister calling people to a greater concern for the proclamation of the Gospel in distant lands and Wollstonecraft, an English feminist woman, who by this time had all but given up on Christian faith. Yet, both, in their own ways, were concerned with freedom. Carey, of course, would not have recognized Wollstonecraft's thesis. His interpretation of 'freedom in Christ' was directed to evangelism. Wollstonecraft's cry for emancipation was rooted in a deeply held commitment to social justice for women. Later, however, as Baptist women began to respond to the call to serve the cause of Christ in far-flung places, the two concerns would meet. Indeed, as British Baptist women organized their own missionary society and sent out women as missionaries, they began to discover in new ways what it means to say that when Christ 'sets you free you are free indeed'.⁴

EARLY BRITISH BAPTIST MISSION WORK AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN

Although, initially, the Baptist Missionary Society only 'officially' appointed men as missionaries, as early as 1796 Carey claimed that women were needed to 'communicate the gospel...in a situation where superstition secludes all women of respectability from hearing the word unless from their own sex.'⁵ While they were not considered to be missionaries in their own right, women who had gone to the mission field with their husbands obviously began to fill this gap, because in 1805, in a document which set forth the 'Principles for the Mission', the male missionaries at Serampore stated their belief that 'the assistance of the females who have embarked with us in the Mission' is needed in order to converse with 'the wives of native converts...and make known the Gospel to native women...'⁶ As the mission work grew, however, apart from occasionally recognizing the need for women to serve as teachers, the British Baptist Missionary Society did not appoint women as missionaries. This did not mean that the women were not involved, simply that their work was not 'officially' recognized. Indeed, their work in translation, agriculture, and education, particularly in operating boarding schools which often provided a source of income to the mission stations, was a significant part of the early British missionary effort.⁷

As the wives of missionaries began to take more responsibility for work among women, some became particularly concerned with the plight of women in zenanas. The zenanas were those parts of high-caste Hindu dwellings from which all males outside the immediate family were excluded.⁸ Women in zenanas were viewed through western eyes as those who were being held in captivity in their homes and desperately needed the freedom that the Gospel could provide. In 1854, Elizabeth Sale⁹ had managed to gain admission to a zenana and in 1866 Marianne Lewis¹⁰ published a little treatise entitled 'A Plea for Zenanas'. She described the condition of 'imprisoned inmates and urged the women at home to form a society in connection with the Baptist Missionary Society to aid its operations amongst the female population of the east.'¹¹

In response to Marianne Lewis' plea, on 22 May 1867 twenty-four women and E.B. Underhill, the Secretary of the Missionary Society (1849-1876), met at John Street, Bedford Row, in London, the temporary headquarters of the BMS, and the Ladies Association for the Support of Zenana Work and Bible Women in India was organized (the name was changed to The Baptist Zenana Mission [BZM] in 1897).

Although the initial meeting of the Baptist Zenana Mission was presided over by E.B. Underhill, the work of the zenana mission was supported and directed almost entirely by women until 1914, when it was amalgamated into an auxiliary of the Baptist Missionary Society. In forming the Zenana Mission, British women believed they were working for the freedom of women who for too long had been bound by the chains of their culture. In many ways, of course, the Zenana Mission displayed all the imperialistic tendencies of the nineteenth-century mission movement and, rather than freeing the women from cultural captivity, it could be argued that they were simply transmitting or perhaps imposing the values of British culture onto others. While more could be said about British missions and imperialism, the focus of this paper is somewhat different. It attempts to explore the liberation that British women themselves discovered as they worked among women in the zenanas. For as British women engaged in mission to those they believed were in cultural captivity, they themselves realized the loosening of bonds which for too long had bound them.

CULTURAL CAPTIVITY - INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE ZENANA

Once women began to visit the zenanas there was no shortage of accounts written to women back home to tell them of what they perceived to be the appalling conditions of many women in India. For instance, while the system of *purdanasheen* (*purda*—a screen and *nasheen* remaining behind or concealed) was not used in all of India, as Ellen Etherington explained in a pamphlet in 1877, it was widespread.¹² Appealing for support for the work among women she claimed that:

The zenana, generally a gloomy, confined, and comfortless dwelling, is practically the world of its inmates, for they seldom leave it. Immured there year after year, without books, without education, strangers to the elevating influence of nature, with but little to think of or talk about, often with no occupation, and with no hope of change for the better, here or hereafter, they drag on a dreary existence, which would be intolerable were they not taught from childhood to believe that their condition is that for which they were born, and that there is nothing higher or better for them.¹³

On the rare occasion when women were allowed to leave their confinement, missionaries reported, that Indian women were covered and women of a higher rank were even carried in a palanquin by men who were not allowed to see the occupant.¹⁴ Given their lives of seclusion, male missionaries had no means by which to communicate the Gospel to women of the upper classes of society. In fact, it seems that even if male missionaries came in contact with women in the market, they were not able to communicate because the poor women seemed to have a dialect of their own.¹⁵ In all the accounts of mission work which were sent back to Britain, emphasis was placed on the inability of male missionaries to reach women with the good news and the terrible conditions in which women in India were kept.

British women at home were shocked at these accounts of women who were without education or medical treatment, and the Zenana Mission diligently worked to send out women teachers, doctors, and nurses. When the work was established, they also enlisted the help of

Bible women — converts to the faith who had been educated by them and then worked alongside the missionaries. By all accounts it appears that they were clear about their primary intention to proclaim the Gospel. And in this they were firm in their approach to women in the Zenana. Ellen Etherington wrote to the home committee in 1875 and claimed:

that there were several rules they did not break — they only taught needlework in homes where pupils were also allowed to learn to read. And they would not continue to teach a class where the Bible or other religious books were objected to.¹⁶

Later the work of the Zenana Mission was expanded to include work among women in China. All who were appointed, however, had to undergo a rigorous and thorough series of interviews. Moreover, before appointment, each woman was required to attend a training school for a period of time and once at their respective mission stations, women were expected to study the language or languages and take an examination to test their linguistic skills at the end of the first year. Strict health checks were also required.

At times the interviewing committee of the BZM did not feel that certain women were up to the job. For instance, when Bessie Renaut was interviewed, the committee reported that ‘her quietness and self-depreciation made it difficult to decide clearly on her powers and fitness for mission work’.¹⁷ While they appreciated her ‘earnest manner and the desire for fitting herself by laying aside her earnings for training’, some doubt was felt as to whether she had the ‘strength of character and power of organising and sustaining work, that would render her suitable for the foreign field’.¹⁸ Her application was considered again at a later date and comment was made on her ‘sweet disposition, self-depreciation and willingness in any way to fit herself for the work.’¹⁹

Eventually the committee decided that she could be appointed but, although the pastor of her church suggested that she be allowed to go to a training school near her home, the committee decided she should go to Miss Gaton’s Home at Glasgow.²⁰ Bessie Renaut indeed went to China in the autumn of 1899 and must have proved her strength of character as the committee later received word that she, along with other

missionaries, had been caught up in the political and social turmoil of the Boxer rebellion and, after hiding without food or water for a week, they were captured, imprisoned and then taken out and killed by the city gate in Hsin Chow.

Numerous examples could be given of women who were sent out by the Zenana Mission. Some toiled without any recognition, others found themselves being fêted for their work. Ellen Farrer's work as a doctor, for example, twice earned her the award of honours from the Indian Imperial government for distinguished public service.²¹

In looking at the work of the BZM, Laura Lauer has rightly pointed out that the BZM came into existence for one reason: to evangelize women in India. As she put it, 'if there had been no special need that only women could fill, the mission probably would never have been formed as existing missionary provisions would be deemed to be sufficient'.²² However, her further observation that 'by emphasising the "prison" of the zenana and the liberating power of Christian motherhood and wifehood, BZM missionaries discursively imprisoned themselves and became effectively unable to criticize gender inequalities in British society' is not quite accurate. In actual fact, one might argue that the women did not imprison themselves, but many had simply accepted the views of a church which was bound in its own cultural captivity. Moreover, far from keeping them silent on the issue of inequality, the opportunities afforded to women through their work with BZM gave them a chance recognize their own captivity and to speak against it. Feminism and the BZM may not have been so radically removed from one another as Lauer would seem to believe, though both the emphasis on women's domesticity and the imperialism of Victorian culture were bonds difficult to break.²³

As their work for women gained notice, so women like Ellen Farrer, for example, missed no opportunity to point out the inconsistencies of treatment of women at home. Invited in 1891, along with Edith Angus, to speak at the Baptist Assembly in Manchester, Farrer took the opportunity to point out that while women were trained and sent abroad as missionaries, they often were not allowed the same privileges for service to others at home. She claimed:

most Christian people are now prepared to acknowledge that there is a wide field for women as medical missionaries in foreign lands, especially in India, where many of our less fortunate sisters must suffer and even die for want of medical aid worthy the name unless they can be attended by a doctor of their own sex, but it is not yet so generally recognised that there is an opening for women in a similar capacity at home.²⁴ There is an old objection, still so frequently raised against the study of medicine by women, that I cannot pass on without a word upon it --- viz., that this study must destroy the finer qualities which constitute true womanliness.

She went on to argue that it was inconsistent for people

to hold that for a woman to be a doctor in this country she must be unwomanly but are willing for women to train to be shipped off to India or China either as medical missionaries or as secular practitioners.²⁵

Farrer's comments highlight the fact that as women were allowed to serve as missionaries, and began working for the freedom of women in other lands, it appears that they were slowly realising their own cultural captivity.²⁶

One important, perhaps the most important, feature of the Zenana mission was the independence which it had from the BMS. Although they had to give regular reports on finance to the BMS male leadership and the yearly meeting was always chaired by a man, in actual fact interviews of potential candidates for ministry and other important decisions of the BZM were made by the women alone. Moreover, women who went out on the mission field were free to take initiatives and, in connexion with the home Zenana committee, could develop the work as they thought best.

In fact it may have been the freedom of opportunity which appealed to so many women who initially went out serve. In 1892, for instance, Edith Brown set sail with Ellen Farrer to begin work in Palwa. She found it difficult to do medical work without trained helper and in 1894 she called a meeting of women missionaries in North India to pray and talk over the idea of establishing a school to train workers. She founded the first medical school for women in India at Ludhiana, known as the

North India School of Medicine for Christian Women. The college opened with four Indian Christian women medical students and two dispensers.²⁷

In 1911 Dr Brown was awarded the silver Kaiser-i-hind medal and in 1922 the Gold Kaiser-i-hind by the Indian government.. In 1932 she was created Dame Commander of the British Empire by King George V: the first woman missionary honoured in that way. She was a person who enjoyed a pastoral role with people. Later, after she retired in 1948, she went to live on a houseboat in Srinagar, Kashmir, and opened a Christian reading room and taught scripture in the mission schools. Her work was not done for awards and recognition. When she died, a friend who worked with her for twenty-six years claimed that on the wall in Dr Brown's office was a plaque — 'My work is for a King'.²⁸ She was not referring to George V!

Whether they were appointed doctors, nurses or teachers, the women appointed by the BZM were expected to learn the local language(s). Some women, like Sarah Ann Raine who was first appointed by the BZM to the Kurku and Indian Hill Mission in 1899, discovered that they were very able linguists. After three years she married John Drake of the same mission and it was reported that much of their time was given to 'pioneer touring, on foot and on horse-back, in the jungles of that region and to the acquisition of the Kurku language'.²⁹ Together they translated *The Gospel According to Mark* into the Kurku language and later wrote a grammar for Kurku. She was also a naturalist and became a regular honorary collector for the British Museum, as well as supplying examples of wildlife to the Kew and Calcutta museums.

Much more could be said of many notable, but often un-noted, women who served in the Zenana Mission. There were many lesser known women, some of whom came from prominent Baptist families, who served with the Zenana. Women like Lilian Edwards from Cardiff who wrote of her work in a little book called a *Welsh Woman's Work in India*.³⁰ Her father was the Principal of the Baptist College in Cardiff, William Edwards, and her step-mother, Sarah was an active social and political leader in Cardiff. Sarah Edwards in fact was an outspoken advocate on issues like temperance and women's suffrage, as well as a

leader of BZM in Wales.

In looking at the work of the Zenana what becomes very clear is that while British women were concerned about the poor women of India and China, at the same time the work had actually allowed them to discover opportunities to work as evangelists and teachers, linguists and doctors in ways that were not always available to them at home. While they had gone to set others free, they had actually been emancipated themselves. Ellen Etherington hints at her new freedom when she wrote in her report to the Zenana committee in 1875 that she had travelled hundreds of miles during the cold season by *palki* and in *dak* carriages.

In many places to which I have been, no European lady had ever before been seen, and I had many opportunities to give away tracts and books in villages where no missionary had been before.³¹

NOTES

- 1 *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (1792 facsimile edn, London, 1961).
- 2 Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), *A Vindication of the Rights of Women; with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (printed at Boston by Peter Edes for Thomas and Andrews, Faust's statue, no.45, Newbury-street, 1792) [Bartleby.com](http://www.bartleby.com), 1999 www.bartleby.com/144/26/1/2006. For a summary of her life see, Barbara Taylor, 'Wollstonecraft, Mary (1759-1797)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (OUP 2004) [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/10893>, accessed 1 Feb 2006].
- 3 Ernest Payne, *Marianne Lewis and Elizabeth Sale: Pioneers of Missionary Work Among Women* (London: Carey Press, n.d), p 4.
- 4 John 8:36 NRSV.
- 5 *Periodical Accounts Relative to the Baptist Missionary Society*, I (1792-1799), 347, Carey to BMS, 'Houghly River', 28 December, 1796 as cited by E Daniel Potts, *British Baptists in India, 1793-1837: The History of Serampore and its Mission* (Cambridge: CUP, 1967), 18. See also Brian Stanley, *The History of the Baptist Missionary Society, 1792-1992* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), 227-232.
- 6 *Form of agreement respecting the great Principles Upon Which the Brethren of the Mission at Serampore Think it Their Duty to Act in the Work of Instructing the Heathen* (Serampore, 1805), 7.
- 7 See Karen E. Smith, 'The Role of Women in Early Baptist Missions', *Review and Expositor*, 89, (1992), 35-48.
- 8 Stanley, *History of the BMS* p.228.
- 9 Elizabeth Sale (née Geale, 1818- 1898) was born in the south of France, but brought up in Devonshire. Her parents were members of the Church of

- England, but she became a convinced Baptist in her teens. She was sent by her parents to London to be the companion to the daughter of Lady Harriet Mitchell. While there she attended the church at Blandford Street, Marylebone, and was baptized. In 1848 she married John Sale, a native of Wokingham and a student preparing for ministry at Horton Academy. They went to Calcutta and then Barisal, and later Jessore where, after four years, she gained entry into a Zenana. Ernest Payne, *Marianne Lewis and Elizabeth Sale Pioneers of Missionary Work Among Women* (London: Carey Press, n.d), 8-13. See also, Olive Mary Coats, 'Elizabeth Sale', in *Great Baptist Women*, ed. A.S. Clement (London: Kingsgate Press, 1955), 56-63.
- 10 Marianne Lewis was born in Bristol where her father, George Gould, was a tradesman and deacon at Counterslip Baptist Church. Her older brother, George, was later the minister of St Mary's Baptist Church, Norwich. She was baptized 6 July 1839 and became a Sunday School teacher. She married Charles Bennett Lewis and they set sail in 1845 for Ceylon. He was transferred to Bengal in 1847 to do translation work. She took on 'the promotion of female education' and in 1852 undertook oversight of the mission school. Ernest Payne, *Marianne Lewis and Elizabeth Sale Pioneers of Missionary Work Among Women* (London: Carey Press, n.d), 4-7.
 - 11 Mrs C.B. Lewis of Calcutta, 'A Plea for Zenanas' (1866) in a bound volume of BZM in the Angus Library.
 - 12 [Ellen Etherington] Mrs Etherington, of Benares, *Zenana Mission, The Purdanasheen System in India*, published by special request of the Ladies' Association for the Support of Zenana Work and Bible Women in India (London, Hutchings and Crowsley, 1877).
 - 13 Ibid., 5.
 - 14 Ibid., 6.
 - 15 Ibid., 9.
 - 16 A letter from Ellen Etherington in report from Benares, 21 February 1875, in *Report of the Ladies Association for the support of the Zenana work and the Bible Women in India in connexion with the Baptist Missionary Society for 1874-5* (London: Yates and Alexander, 1875).
 - 17 Minutes of BZM Committee Meeting, 12 October, 1897, Minute Book No.8, (Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford), 80.
 - 18 Ibid.
 - 19 Minutes of BZM Committee Meeting, 10 November 1897, Minute Book No.8, (Angus Library, Oxford) 87.
 - 20 Glasgow became a centre for the education of middle-class women in the 1830s and 1840s with the formation of Young Ladies Institutes. See Eleanor Gordon and Gwyneth Nair, *Public Lives, Women, Family and Society in Victorian Britain* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 137ff.
 - 21 Ellen Margaret Farrer, daughter of William Farrer, born at Hampstead on 20 September 1865. Originally a member of Grenville Congregational Church, she was baptized on 10 June 1891 at Heath Street Baptist Church, Hampstead. Educated at South Hampstead High School for girls and Bedford College, London, she trained at the London School of Medicine for Women and the Royal Free Hospital. She became the first woman doctor for the Baptist Zenana Mission. She died at Rickmansworth 14 October 1959, aged ninety-four. *Baptist Union Handbook*,

- 1961, 347.
- 22 Laura Lauer, 'Opportunities for Baptist Women and the "Problem" of the Baptist Zenana Mission, 1867-1913' in Sue Morgan, ed., *Women, Religion and Feminism in Britain, 1750-1900* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 218.
 - 23 This point is discussed in Susan Thorne, 'Missionary-Imperial Feminism', in *Gendered Missions: Women and Men in Missionary Discourse and Practice*, Mary Taylor Huber and Nancy C. Lutkehaus, eds., (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 53.
 - 24 Miss Farrer MB, BS. of Hampstead, 'Women's Work Among the Sick Poor' and 'Women's Work in Connection with the Social Condition of the Poor' by Miss Edith A. Angus, of London. Two papers read at the autumn assembly of the Baptist Union, Manchester, Thursday, 8 October 1891 in *Training of Women for Christian Work* (London: Alexander and Shepherd, 1891), 8.
 - 25 Ibid., 10.
 - 26 Steinbach notes the complaints of nineteenth-century women because medicine was considered to be a subject for which women were unsuited. See Susie Steinbach, *Women in England, 1760-1914* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson), 75.
 - 27 'The Story of a Woman Pioneer, Dame Edith Brown of Ludhiana', *Baptist Times*, 10 January 1957, 16. Born in Whitehaven, Cumberland, she went to Girton College, Cambridge, and then taught in Exeter before training at the London School of Medicine for Women. She went to India as a missionary and died in Kashmir, December 1956.
 - 28 Report of her memorial service, *Baptist Times*, 31 January, 1957, 8.
 - 29 Record of her death, *Monthly News Letter*, Vol. XLI, November 1929, in Angus Library, 11.
 - 30 Lilian M. Edwards, *A Welsh Woman's Work in India*, (Caerphilly: 'Pantyreos' Rectory Road, n.d).
 - 31 *Report of the Ladies Association for the support of the Zenana work and the Bible women in India in connexion with the Baptist Missionary Society for 1874-5* (London Yates and Alexander, 1875), 25.

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- Nicholas McDowell, *The English Radical Imagination and Revolution*, Oxford, pp219, ISBN 0-19-926051-6

This book takes its lead from the assessment that the radicals of the 1640s were generally ignorant and ill-educated 'mechanics'. This was 'Gangraena' Edwards' hostile stance and Christopher Hill later subverted it to represent 'history from below'. Nicholas McDowell seeks to redress the balance and argues that there was a depth and complexity to the radical activists, many of whom were well-read and well-educated men and, as a literary phenomenon, their writings display a subtlety in style, language and use of text. Case studies on some Ranter, Leveller and Quaker writers illustrate the argument, with a chapter on Milton too. SC