
How would it feel if, as a mother, you were forbidden to teach your children about Christianity? By law! Imagine that your government barred you from teaching religious precepts to your own children. And the penalty? Life imprisonment. Or, how would it feel if – by law – you were required to teach your children about Christianity? Living in the modern Western world of passivity or hostility to Christianity makes this hard to envision. But such turnabouts frequent the history of Christian mission in France.

Michele Miller Sigg’s book *Birthing Revival: Women and Mission in Nineteenth-Century France* presents a rich historical record of how during the French Réveil Protestant women in France stepped up to challenges like this and more, and did something about it.

She begins her narrative by depicting those contrasts. For three centuries (1500–1800 AD) Huguenot Christians in France endured persecution by Catholics. The prohibition edict harshly suppressed the Huguenots. Sometimes those Christians fled. Sometimes they fought. Sometimes they went underground.

Women – much a part of that exciting saga – have received little recognition or academic attention for their efforts to evangelize and help the needy. Sigg’s account highlights the often obscured ways in which women fostered mission. By working under their husband’s name, developing Holy Spirit-centered prophecies, leading worship in secret assemblies, and aiding the sick and starving, Protestant women birthed revival in France.

When persecution lessened during the nineteenth century, French Christian women worked with John Frederic Oberlin to develop knitting rooms and infant schools. Women guides taught the children. Those efforts provided money for charity and aided to get hundreds of vulnerable children off the streets and into a safer environment. The women also fed and clothed many others. In addition, they formed Bible Societies and taught people to read the Bible themselves. Another notable achievement was their foundation of a Committee of the Paris Mission Society. They brought their reports to the all-male sessions; they recruited women to go to poor areas of the city to work among the impoverished. They brought the gospel to many. “Just do it!” characterized their attitude. Theologically they taught that as early Christians followed Jesus with their whole lives, so should they. Many dedicated all of their time and energy to prophecy groups, infant schools, feeding the poor, and helping persecuted Christians.
Evangelical in the broadest sense, the women were ecumenical before the Edinburgh 1910 conference defined the term! They worked across denominational lines bringing together Methodists, Moravians, Episcopalians, and Catholics. Their primary goal: Live out the gospel of Jesus Christ in any way, shape or form.

Much of this work has gone unnoticed and unrecorded. Women were subsumed under their husband’s name and identity. They often lacked public support and funding. “Birthing revival” is an aptly name for this account of their work. Giving birth takes time. Changes in one’s body come slowly, almost imperceptibly. And the result is miraculous. Even in our modern hospital-oriented age, people gather excitedly around a baby being born.

Sigg’s book blows a fresh breeze through our knowledge of Christian mission in France. It stands in the tradition of women authors who reclaim history for contemporary readers – Michelle Perrot in France and Dana Robert in the United States among others. Almost overly detailed at times, the book is well written, well documented, and certainly an interesting and informative read for women and men alike. And so we might ask: how many other histories of women in mission have been left out of academic discourse? And who will reclaim them?

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