CHAPTER TWO

THE BASEL WOMEN’S MISSION IN THE EUROPEAN AND THE BASEL CONTEXT

The Basel Mission’s project to propagate in West Africa what it considered proper Christian femininity formed part of a larger enterprise with, in many respects, a trans-national character. It was conceived of in the context of British missionary activity in India; it was discussed in British evangelical discourse in the ‘mother country’ and appropriated by British, US-American and continental European missionary societies. It had links to the secular projects of humanitarianism, the ‘civilising mission’ and imperialism. It built on the idea of a specifically designed missionary activity of women addressing women, which first evolved in Britain.¹

In the late 1830s, immediately before the Basel Mission decided to re-commence its activities on the Gold Coast, the topic of ‘women’s mission’ began to appear in the discussions of the Basel home board, often with references to Britain and British India. In Britain the moves for an overseas missionary enterprise by and for women had already started during the early 19th century. In Anglophone usage it is often called ‘women’s work for women’, thus referring to its envisioned actors and addressees. German-speaking discourses coined the analogous term ‘women’s mission’ (Frauenmission), which translates as both ‘mission by women’ and ‘mission for women’.

The objective was to propagate overseas a model of Christian femininity, which British evangelical discourse conceptualised as ‘woman’s mission’. Within this concept woman’s proper sphere consisted in what Alison Twells describes as ‘missionary domesticity’ – thus combining its notional boundedness to the home with its putative global relevance.² The concept appears to have been consensual among British

¹ Although women’s mission in its organised form originated in Britain, during the 19th century in the United States a similar movement became very popular (Dana L. Robert, American Women in Mission: a social history of their thought and practice, Macon 1998). As this did not play a role for the Basel Women’s Mission it will not be discussed here.

² Clare Midgley analyses British discourses on the (overseas) missionary agency of
evangelicals and central European pietists, but the way it was supposed to translate into action was subject to debates, showing some marked differences between Britain and Basel. Even though both subscribed to a similar, gendered conceptualisation of a binary polarity between the public and the private spheres, they did not assign to women the same room for manoeuvre. Looking at the ways in which Basel appreciated, appropriated or rejected the notions of the British discourse and the organisational template offered by the first society for women’s mission in Britain, the following chapter will analyse how Basel shaped its own brand of women’s mission.

**Conceptual Background and Organisational Roots**

The notions guiding women’s mission in Basel, as well as its organisational templates, can be traced to two main sources: concepts of womanhood and organised forms of female agency in Basel, and the corresponding British discourse and organisations. The pietist networks which cut across the actual or notional boundaries of the national served to connect both. Thus I will first sketch how the Basel Mission was situated within European networks.

**British connections of the Basel Mission**

The Basel Mission had its roots in the ‘Deutsche Christentumsgesellschaft’, a society connecting various local and regional groups within the pietist and revivalist movement of Germanophone Europe during the 18th and 19th century. It had its organisational centre in Basel. Its members were involved in the founding of a number of revivalist organisations, among them the first Germanophone bible society in 1804. The Basel Mission was founded in 1815. For the bible society,

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3 On the link to Britain already: W. Haas, *Erlitten und erstritten*, p. 27.