The Flemish mystic and prophetess Antoinette Bourignon (1616-1680) is unquestionably one of the most fascinating personalities of the seventeenth century. She was not deterred by the Pauline commandment that prescribed silence for women, ventured into the forbidden realm of theology and crossed the dividing line between the various denominations by founding an ecumenical congregation avant la lettre. She did all this out of the conviction that God had chosen her to restore true Christianity on earth. Presently the end of the world would come and the Last Judgment would be passed. Only the ‘true Christians’, she promised her audience, would be saved. She alone, and no one else, could show them the way to eternal salvation. The missionary task that Bourignon believed she had to carry out stemmed from the very personal religious development she underwent, on the crossroads of and in dialogue with the most diverse churches and religious movements.

Antoinette Bourignon was brought up as a Roman Catholic. She was born in Lille on 13 February 1616 to wealthy parents, who belonged to the merchant class. Antoinette was the third child of the marriage and the second girl. She must have received an education befitting her sex and class, but she refused to follow the path her parents had mapped out for her and ran away at the age of twenty to escape a marriage arranged by her father. Bourignon wanted to devote her life to God. In her first autobiography, La Parole de Dieu (1663), written at the request of the vicar general of Mechelen, she relates how, when she was about eighteen, she had had a vision in which St Augustine had appeared to her and commanded her to restore his order. For her, this marked the start of a spiritual quest, which was ultimately to result in her taking a critical and independent stance in respect of the Roman Catholic Church and its doctrinal authority. Over the years Bourignon was to sample various forms of the spiritual life without being drawn in by any of them. From 1653 to 1662 she ran a home for poor girls, which she helped to finance, in Lille. When she found herself embroiled in a scandal because of her harsh treatment of the children entrusted to her care, she resigned from her posts as mistress and governor. In 1663 Bourignon went to Mechelen, where she encountered Jansenism and became involved in the struggle between Jansenists and anti-Jansenists. In 1667 she left her Roman Catholic homeland for the multi-confessional Republic of the United Provinces and settled in Amsterdam, where she came into contact with non-Catholics for the first time in her life. Here she talked not only to representatives of various Protestant congregations but also to rabbis and ‘atheists’. In Amsterdam, where there was freedom of the press and Bourignon did not have to submit her writings to an ecclesiastic censor, she started to publish her first letters and treatises. Bourignon spent the last nine years of her life in Northwest Germany, where Lutheranism had been proclaimed the state religion. There she became enmeshed in a series of conflicts with Lutheran ministers, who accused her of heresy and were afraid that a sect would be formed. Persecution forced her to move time after time, until in 1680 she at last decid-
ed to go back to Amsterdam. She became so ill on the way, however, that she was com-
pelled to break her journey in Franeker, where she died in the early hours of 31 October
1680.

The oeuvre that Antoinette Bourignon left is huge, comprising as it does hundreds
of letters, a series of treatises, two autobiographies, rules for the true Christian, poems,
prayers and even works of exegesis. Some of it appeared in print in her lifetime. After
Bourignon’s death in 1680 Pierre Poiret, one of her followers, assumed the task of
organizing the manuscripts she had left and publishing those that had not yet been
published. Poiret also worked to bring about a complete edition of Bourignon’s collect-
ed works. The result was the reissue in 1686, and again in 1717, of her writings (nineteen
volumes) by the eminent Amsterdam publisher Wetstein. When we add the works pub-
lished posthumously to those published during her lifetime, we can get a picture of the
amazing extent of Bourignon’s oeuvre. In total there are forty-six works in French,
written in the space of more than forty years and published over a period of seventeen
years. Dutch, German and Latin translations of these writings appeared, some during
Bourignon’s lifetime, some posthumously. When Bourignon’s books found their way to
mystic circles in England and Scotland towards the end of the seventeenth century,
there was even a series of English translations of her writings. If the translations are
included, Bourignon has a total of 164 different publications to her name. This is an
unprecedented number. No other seventeenth-century female author nor any of
Bourignon’s male kindred spirits in the mystic-spiritualist milieu of the time can rival
her in this respect.

In short, Antoinette Bourignon caused a stir - a stir that has not only assured her a
place in reference works of all kinds, but has also made her the subject of academic stud-
ies and literary works. She has evidently continued to appeal to the imagination,
despite - or perhaps precisely because of - the fact that the Inquisition placed her writ-
ings on the Index and the General Synod of Scotland officially condemned her doc-
trines in 1710. And yet the repertoire of descriptions that have so far been Bourignon’s
lot are remarkably limited and one-sided. She is, for instance, repeatedly described as a
‘hysteric’ or a ‘zealot’. It is also striking that in virtually all the studies devoted to her to
date, Bourignon is considered as a completely isolated phenomenon, whereas in her
time she was by no means the only person to believe that he or she had been chosen by
God as His instrument. And lastly there is insufficient acknowledgement that, with her
religious message, Bourignon succeeded in gathering around her a group of predomi-
nantly male followers, whom she recruited across the boundaries of the churches and
for whom she served as their spiritual leader. This meant that she not only broke
through the confessional dividing lines but also transcended the boundaries imposed
upon the female sex by church and society.

This biography focuses on Antoinette Bourignon’s spiritual leadership. At first
sight this leadership would appear to be an anomaly and, in a sense, it is. For how could
a woman without any formal theological training in an age when it was believed that
she should keep silent, particularly where religious matters were concerned, arrogate to
herself a position as a spokesperson in religiosis? And what was it that meant she was rec-
ognized in her own time as a spiritual leader and was able to attract and attach a group
of followers that included eminent thinkers and clergymen of all persuasions? Answer-
ing these questions satisfactorily requires more than a reconstruction of Bourignon’s
self-definition, her ideas and the make-up of her group of followers. What is needed is a systematic analysis of the interaction between the course of Bourignon’s own life, the context of the formation of the group in which she worked out her ideas and tried to put them into practice, and the structure and modalities of her spiritual leadership. To this end I make use of new insights that have arisen out of gender history, book history and cultural history. They provide various concepts and approaches that can be used to investigate Antoinette Bourignon’s life in conjunction with her work, and thus obtain a better grasp of the different dimensions of her spiritual leadership.

Anyone who wants to understand anything about Antoinette Bourignon’s personal life and the structure and modalities of her leadership cannot avoid thinking about her sex. Had she been a man rather than a woman, her life would undoubtedly have been very different. Bourignon herself was all too well aware of this. It was for good reason that she asked in one of her autobiographical works why God had not made a man of her. She would then have been able, as she said herself, to do much more for Him than she could as a woman. By using the concept of gender, it is possible to avoid the essentialism that was so typical of early studies of Bourignon. Gender, after all, conceives of masculinity and femininity as cultural constructs and focuses on the question of how sex ‘works’. Through the emphasis that has come to be placed on language and semantics in gender history, more attention has been paid to the discursive nature of ‘the self’. This has also raised the problem of the role of the autobiography as a source for the biography. These new insights enable us, among other things, to evaluate La Parole de Dieu and Sa vie extérieure, Bourignon’s autobiographical works, in an entirely new way. Contrary to what has been thought until now, these are not so much referential texts as texts whose primary function was to serve Bourignon’s claim to a voice on religious matters.

The successful communication of her message was crucial to Antoinette Bourignon’s breakthrough. And this brings us to the most important medium that she pressed into service - printing. Until now, however, no serious attention has ever been paid to the importance of printing to the publicizing of her message. The emphasis in the studies devoted to her has been on her religious ideas and the polemics she engaged in and hence on the content of her books. The relatively new historical specialism of book history has introduced a new approach in which the book as ‘data carrier’ is key. The history of books is thus conceived as ‘the social and cultural history of communication by means of the printed word’. A distinction can be made between different stages, which can roughly be summed up in the three processes of production, distribution and consumption. In Bourignon’s case it is possible, thanks to the surviving copy of her writings, to reconstruct the production phase in broad outline. This throws an entirely new light on the way in which the writings of a seventeenth-century female author were published. She originally let it appear as if she left this to one of her male friends. In reality she did it herself.

There can be no leadership without followers. This is why no study of Bourignon’s religious leadership can ignore her adherents and their adoption of the standards, values and rules she formulated. Was this a matter of persuasive communication? In order to be able to answer this question it is wise to identify the various steps involved in this dynamic process and take account of the fact that the change that is brought about does not always take place immediately. In Bourignon’s case this means that we first have to
look at how she formulated and disseminated her message, and in which social and cultural milieus it won acceptance. It is then necessary to answer the question as to how this message was recognized and appropriated by the recipient. How did the members of the group incorporate it into their own perception of reality? Because this process of active appropriation and imbuing with significance is context-related, the situations in which members of the group proved to have been receptive to Bourignon’s call to an evangelical life have to be considered. In this regard, the moment when the spark caught hold is important. As also, when this was the case, is the moment when the spell was broken and the person concerned turned away from Bourignon to return to the world or to seek refuge with one of her competitors. In these cases the context in which the communication took place must have changed, or the recipient must have deemed other values to be more important. Then there is no longer any question of persuasive communication. Appropriation is consequently an important instrument in analysing the dynamic between Bourignon and her followers, but it also offers the possibility of investigating how she herself formed, out of the complex of cultural traditions and forms that were available to her, a religious model to shape her spiritual aspirations—spiritual motherhood.

In her writings Bourignon presented herself as the ‘mother of the true Christians’ or the ‘mother of the true believers’ and was acknowledged as such by her own followers. Her spiritual motherhood thus served her spiritual leadership. It was in fact the most important instrument of which she availed herself in shaping her leadership. Until now, however, her claim to the ‘motherhood of the true Christians’ has never been valued at its real worth. It is only by examining the way Bourignon bent spiritual motherhood to her purpose that it is possible to understand how she was able to function as a spiritual leader. It gave her the opportunity to demand her own status, and in that sense not only gave her an identity but also reinforced her authority. At the same time, Bourignon was able to put her spiritual motherhood at the service of the transformation that her followers had to undergo in order to shape their new identities.

Anyone wanting to make a historical analysis of a life is confronted not only with the fragmentary nature of the source material but also with the problem that in the reality of everyday life all sorts of activities and processes run through one another or impact on one another, and these have to be separated for the purposes of the analysis. In order to be able to see the connections between the different processes nonetheless, it is important to opt for a form that does justice to the simultaneity of these processes. This is why this book is made up of four parts, each of which explores a different dimension of Bourignon’s spiritual leadership. Splitting the work into different parts also makes it possible to analytically disentangle and discuss the jumble of processes that took place at the same time.

Part I centres on Bourignon’s highly personal religious development, at the crossroads of and in dialogue with the most diverse churches and religious movements. Here I demonstrate that the way she developed and represented her personal identity as an instrument sent by God should not simply be seen as a form of opportunism or as the result of purely personal ambitions, but rather as her interpretation of the process that was contained in the search for fulfilment in her own life. A process like this can be understood as the result of an interaction between personal desires and intentions on the one hand and the possibilities and limitations of the environment on the other. In
Bourignon’s case, the bourgeois merchant class in which she grew up and the climate of the Counter-reformation which left its mark on the religious life of early seventeenth-century Lille provided a repertoire of opportunities from which she as an individual, within the possibilities that were offered to her as a woman, consciously or unconsciously made her own choices.

Part II is devoted to the mediation of the message and acts as a bridge between part I and part III, which deals with the formation of the group. In this second part it becomes clear how Bourignon succeeded in making good her claim to a position in which she could speak on religion, and what role her texts, letters and books played in this. She kept a significant degree of control over this process by buying her own printing press and getting her followers to prepare her writings for the press. She also, as was customary in smaller religious circles, kept as much control as possible over the distribution of her work, although from 1669 onwards she did call on the assistance of various Amsterdam bookseller-publishers. They did not, however, take any financial risk. Bourignon continued to be responsible for this herself until 1675; thereafter she was able to call upon various followers who were prepared to provide financial backing.

The published collections of Bourignon’s letters, in particular, had a manifest effect in recruiting people to the group. This was due in no small measure to the editing of the content that the letters underwent before they appeared in print. The epistolary form was maintained, but personal messages and references were as far as possible edited out. This meant that authenticity was preserved, while at the same time a new readership were offered various options for identification. As the author, Bourignon could use these letters to create a personal bond with the unknown readers of her books. The epistolary form must have made it easier for the readers, in their turn, to seek personal contact with the woman whom they had got to know through reading her published letters as one who loved the souls of so many ‘friends’.

The formation of the group is central to part III. It can be seen from the subjects of the questions arising out of her published letters which were put to Bourignon that her books found their way to a readership that was interested in devotional writings regardless of whether they came from orthodox sources or originated from religious dissidents. Aside from Bourignon’s books, these people were reading the works of Tauler, Thomas à Kempis, Benedict Canfeld, Savonarola, St John of the Cross, Jacob Boehme, Jan Rothe, Jean de Labadie, and Benjamin Furly and other Quakers. The fact that some of Bourignon’s followers later switched to the Quakers or to the Lutheran Pietists is evidence that they were, in any event in part, what could be described as ‘seeking Christians’. Some of the readers of Bourignon’s writings were attracted by her call to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, and wanted nothing better than to go into ‘the wilderness’ with her. A decision of this kind will almost always have stemmed from a combination of factors. Many of Bourignon’s followers, for instance, sought their salvation outside the church because personal experiences had caused them to lose their faith in the clergy. A number of them are known to have been in a state of crisis at the time when they became acquainted with Bourignon’s writings, and this made them more receptive to the appeal of her message. What, above all, made the decision to follow Bourignon attractive, however, was that she not only claimed to know the path that led to eternal salvation, but was also willing to personally guide and support her followers on the way. Followers who needed this and were prepared to submit to
Bourignon’s authority were thus assured of her motherly concern and care for their physical and spiritual well-being. It was precisely because Bourignon did not want to establish a new church or sect, but instead propounded a religious practice aimed at transcending the ecclesiastical divisions of her age, that she left everyone free to remain a member of a church or not, as they chose. This practical focus provided Bourignon’s followers with the leeway, within certain bounds, to put their own interpretation on what, according to her, the life of a ‘true Christian’ should be.

Part IV is a synthesis of the three preceding parts and concentrates on the structure and modalities of Bourignon’s spiritual leadership. By proclaiming herself the ‘mother of the true Christians’ she could relate to her following in an authoritative and at the same time affective way. In this sense her ‘motherhood’ served not only as a means of raising her social status from that of an unmarried woman, it was also the most important instrument she had for establishing her position within her own circle. By using the metaphor of motherhood, Bourignon succeeded in symbolically turning the hierarchy of the male-female relationship and the relationship of authority between clergy and laity into that of a mother-child relationship and thus, as a lay person, shaping the spiritual role she claimed. At the same time, it made it possible to transform the network that grew up around the figure of Bourignon into a new, symbolic system of kinship, based on spiritual ties, in which the followers saw themselves as related to one another as brothers and sisters through their spiritual mother. As long as communications were confined to correspondence and the motherhood remained metaphorical, the way Bourignon practised her spiritual leadership and exerted her authority met with little resistance in her own circle. When, however, the ‘children’ sought the physical presence of their ‘mother’, it not infrequently led to tension and conflicts. In practice, the ‘child’ more than once failed to conform to the wishes of the ‘mother’ and vice versa. Tensions and conflicts between Bourignon and her followers show that she had great difficulty binding her ‘children’ to her permanently. It is clear that Bourignon was prepared to exert herself to the utmost to make her religious enterprise a success, both spiritually and practically, but that this aim was thwarted on more than one occasion by the problems that the organization, maintenance and care of a group of followers entailed. When Bourignon died in 1680 there remained only a small nucleus of five followers, who took care of her legacy.

Adopting an integrated approach to Bourignon’s life and work rather than a straightforward chronological structure made it possible to do justice to the complex personality she was. It has, for instance, become clear that Bourignon was not as unworldly as has been thought until now. In order to establish a position for herself in the market of competing prophets and mystic spiritualists, she threw not only herself and her writings but also her financial assets, her commercial knowledge and her business relations into the battle. Bourignon was consequently not just the spiritual leader of a group of Christians who wanted to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ under her guidance. She was at the same time the commercial manager of what can reasonably be called a religious business enterprise. In that respect, she was and remained in her later life true to the business sense with which she had been imbued as a child.

The biography concludes with a series of appendices. These provide, among other things, an overview of the complete works of Antoinette Bourignon, of her correspondence and of the group of followers. Thanks in part to the examination of a great deal
of new source material (including hundreds of original letters written by Bourignon) it was possible to reconstruct the circle of people around her. The appendix in question is the outcome of prosopographical research and provides direct access to Bourignon’s spiritual network, which extended far beyond the borders of the Republic of the United Provinces.

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