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The Religious Feminist Subject as Material-Discursive Circuit

A Christian Woman Reads and Re-reads Eve

Ingie Hovland | ORCID: 0000-0002-2926-6326

University of Georgia, Athens, GA, USA

ingiehovland@uga.edu

Abstract

This article describes three different readings of the creation story of Eve and Adam, occurring over the life span of Henny Dons, a Protestant Christian and first-wave feminist in early-twentieth-century Norway. I discuss her changing understandings of this creation account over the course of her life. More broadly I explore her approach to biblical reading (as receiving, arranging, and iterating) and how this shaped her as a religious feminist subject. I argue that what is going on in her iterated re-readings is not fully captured by the frame of self-cultivation. Rather, this religious feminist subject shows us a series of woman-word operations that receive and arrange a variety of material and discursive entities together in a circuit of “being created woman.”

Keywords

Christianity – feminism – language – new materialism – reading – the subject

1 Introduction: The Religious Feminist Subject

This article is about one woman, Henny Dons, who read and re-read the biblical account of Adam and Eve in Genesis 1–3 over the course of the first half of the twentieth century, while remaining loyal to her pietistic Lutheran tradition in Norway. I am interested in the question: How does her reading give us insight into her as a religious feminist subject? Several anthropologists have drawn our attention to different ways that Christians read the Bible (e.g. Bielo 2009; Engelke 2009; Haynes 2020; Irvine 2010; Kirsch 2011). Together with Britt

Halvorson, I have sought to extend this conversation by observing that these studies on Christian reading often implicitly posit an androgynous reader, and we have suggested that other reading operations come to light if we include the gendered body of the Christian reader in our analyses (Halvorson and Hovland 2021; see also Llewellyn 2015). Here I wish to explore further the relationship between religious reading and the religious feminist subject.

I first became intrigued by Henny Dons when I came across the boxes of notebooks and papers that she had saved and that had ended up on the shelves of the Mission Archive in Stavanger, Norway. She was a schoolteacher in Kristiania, Norway, who was strongly committed to a conservative evangelical Lutheran tradition that was focused on the cause of overseas mission. At the same time, she lived in the capital city of Norway and was influenced by the cause of the women's movement that was gaining ground in her upper-middle-class circles. In 1903 she argued for women's right to vote within one of the Christian organizations in which she was involved, the Norwegian Mission Society (NMS), a whole decade before women were granted the right to vote in Norway's state elections. She became widely known through her advocacy and committee work, and from 1910 to 1919 she was voted onto the board of the Norwegian Women's National Council, an umbrella organization for groups—including the suffragists—working on women's position in Norwegian society. In 1917 her leadership abilities led her to become the first woman employed in the central administration of NMS in the newly created post of "Children's Secretary." She was a sought-after Christian speaker, despite the fact that it was still highly uncommon for Christian women to deliver public talks at this time. In 1922 she reported that she had given talks at more than 100 Christian meetings in the previous year alone.¹ However, in the last decade of her work for NMS and after her retirement in 1939 she seems to have been somewhat sidelined in the organization. For example, in the five-volume centennial history that NMS published in 1943, she was mentioned in only three short sentences (Nome 1943 vol. 2: 123, 155). Much later, in 2009, one of the buildings on the college campus in Stavanger that was formerly NMS' Mission School (today VID Specialized University) was given a plaque bearing her name: Henny Dons House. The plaque is a small material reminder of this woman who once navigated and stitched together—albeit with considerable difficulty—her two worlds of Christianity and feminism. Here I will explore this stitching-together through her readings of Eve.

1 Archive of the Norwegian Mission Society (*Det Norske Misjonsselskap*, hereafter NMS), Hjemmearkiv 1920–1970, Gen. sek. 90, Inn. brev hjem. 1921–1922, Box 430/8, Henny Dons: "Aarsmelding for 1921," 10 Jan 1922. The NMS Archive is held in the Mission Archives, Stavanger.

I will begin by situating Dons' biblical reading in relation to the process of gaining women's voting rights, a common focus for the so-called "first wave" of the feminist movement in the regions around the North Atlantic at the turn of the twentieth century. However, although she was part of the "first wave," this article also contributes to the exploration of how women who use religion to form their feminism may not fit neatly within the feminist "waves." As Dawn Llewellyn has argued, the waves have a "secular temperament," since Western feminist theory today often presents the progression of the waves as "a secular narrative" of progress that is disconnected from religion (2015, 4). At times this narrative may be based on the tacit assumptions that the secular and the religious are opposed, and that "a feminist" is a secularly-oriented subject who has managed to shed the conservative dogmatism of religion. This self-liberating feminist subject does not read or subject herself to patriarchal biblical texts. As I will explore in this article, Henny Dons presents us with a different type of feminist subject. Therefore, while I will discuss her feminism in relation to the first-wave issue of voting rights, I will also situate her in relation to her religious tradition and its cosmic imaginary. As Hillary Kaell (2020) has suggested, Christian women in the nineteenth and early-twentieth-century North Atlantic world did not just operate in relation to a regional history but also a global one that for them included "other" figures and more-than-human presences. As I explore Henny Dons' reading and re-reading of *Eve*, I will configure her Protestant feminism in relation to both local institutional concerns about voting as well as a cast of global "characters" and more-than-human forces. Thinking about religious feminisms in this way is thus also a contribution to thinking creatively about how we describe twentieth-century feminist histories and the feminist subject today.

At this point, readers may object that the secular, self-liberating feminist subject has already been thoroughly critiqued, most prominently by Saba Mahmood (2005). Mahmood studied women actively engaged in the Islamic revival in Egypt. She argued that the feminist project of these women did not center on a sense of "freedom" or even "resistance" to patriarchal religious traditions; they did not match the humanist, secular subject posited by modern liberal feminisms. Instead, drawing on poststructuralist virtue ethics, Mahmood suggested that these Muslim women are best understood as self-cultivating subjects within that patriarchally-marked religious space—"subjects" in the double sense, as a subject who acts and is subjected simultaneously, an ongoing process of double-edged "subjectivation" (e.g. Butler 1993; Foucault 1978). As subjects they sought to enact virtues, such as piety. We might say that, in Mahmood's view, these women skillfully inhabited their patriarchally-assigned place in the tradition's discourse, using it for their own self-cultivation, and in

so doing they present an alternative vision of “human flourishing” (Mahmood 2005, xxiv). My understanding of modern religious feminisms has been deeply shaped by Mahmood and the many ethnographic studies that have developed similar arguments about religious women’s self-making practices, such as R. Marie Griffith’s (1997) work on the “power of submission” among evangelical women in the United States who meet to pray together, or Kate Dugan’s (2017) description of the “flourishing” of young Catholic women on American college campuses who similarly choose to embrace their submissive role as women and to adopt gendered prayer practices. However, in this article I will go beyond Mahmood and others’ focus on religious women’s self-cultivation within the broader frame of a poststructuralist virtue ethics. As Amira Mittermaier (2012) has argued in her study of Muslims in Egypt, religious practitioners work with a more distributed agency than that tied to the self, as practitioners also work with agency that stems from more-than-human actors, and she suggests that we might move “beyond the trope of self-cultivation” when studying religion in the world (2012, 247).

Building on these lines of thought that take us beyond both the self-liberating secular feminist subject of the waves and also beyond the self-cultivating religious feminist subject of poststructuralist virtue ethics, I want to instead place the religious feminist subject in the conversation on new materialism. Feminist new materialism urges us to pay attention to the impact of the material and to re-think the question of what, for example, the natural and the real are in relation to a woman (Alaimo and Hekman 2008). This is a further development of the poststructuralist view of the subject as an effect of discourse, but with a shift in emphasis toward a more realist attention to the organic, technological, and linguistic components that meet in a circuit that then continuously becomes, for example, “a woman.” The most well-known of these visions is probably Donna Haraway’s “cyborg” (Haraway 1990). Here I will mention just one scholar in this conversation, Karen Barad, and her view of how bodies are constituted through “performativity.” She outlines her view in contrast with that of Judith Butler. Butler draws on the poststructuralist tradition to argue that a woman is constituted through performativity, which she defines as iterative citationality: Butler sees the matter, or materialization, of women’s bodies as “a kind of citationality [...] the citing of power” (1993, 15). Barad argues that performativity is instead “iterative intra-activity” (2008, 146). Barad is of interest to me as I explore women and reading because even as she emphasizes materiality she also acknowledges the impact of language, for example in her view of bodies as “material-discursive phenomena” (2008, 141). The lens of feminist new materialism thus moves us beyond virtue ethics toward a more distributed and realist ethics, not primarily anchored in the self,

but rather anchored in a material-discursive subject—or circuit—that is produced through iterative intra-activity.

While Henny Dons in her Norwegian-Lutheran world in the early twentieth century was far apart from current feminist theory in most respects, I have been intrigued by a curious overlap between her and the current conversation on feminist new materialism. Dons demonstrated a similar understanding of a woman as someone being continuously pieced together of materiality and language, of human and more-than-human entities, amidst “the weightiness of the world” (Barad 2008, 144), and as someone who could not cultivate an ethical self on her own but instead had to work on ethical values that were generated by and distributed among multiple entities. I therefore follow Dons’ readings and re-readings of Eve as an example of a religious feminist who engaged devotional reading as part of the process of being “a woman” as a distributed entity. It seems to me that Dons was reading about the creation of women, and was herself being a woman, as iteration: in her reading she was continuously “being created woman” by something else. The religious feminist subject that emerges here might be called a series of “woman-word operations” in which a body and words operated together as a collective ethical agent, not so much working from or toward ethical values in the vein of virtue ethics, as working *on* ethical values in an iterative process of valuing (Hovland 2022). I argue that this ethical stance is not fully captured by the frame of self-cultivation or self-making, but that the feminist subject in this case could instead be seen as an intra-active material-discursive circuit. Ultimately, rather than concluding that women who willingly submit to patriarchal religious discourses have “power” or are “flourishing,” I attend here to the contradictory effects of their forming of these types of feminist places in language.

The article describes three moments of reading Eve in Henny Dons’ life: first, Lutheran men reading Eve in 1904 when they were deciding whether women could vote; second, Dons reading Eve in her published Bible study in 1928; and third, Dons’ handwritten notes on Eve for one of her talks to Christian women’s groups, around 1953. Between these three scenes I have inserted brief interludes discussing Dons’ approach to reading the Bible: reading as receiving, reading as arranging, and reading as iterating. In the conclusion I return to the process of “being created woman” in Dons’ religious feminism.

2 Norwegian-Lutheran Men Reading Eve in 1904: Can Women Vote?

In 1903–1904, men in the Norwegian Mission Society (NMS) debated whether women could vote in their organization. NMS had been established as a result

of the nineteenth-century evangelical revivals, with the purpose of sending Lutheran missionaries from Norway overseas. Around the turn of the twentieth century NMS was the largest Christian organization in Norway outside the Lutheran state church, and the bulk of the formal organization consisted of a grassroots network of local “mission groups” across the entire country. Each mission group voted, every three years, on which delegates they would send to the NMS general assembly, and although both women and men attended the groups, only men were allowed to vote in these elections and to be elected.

In 1903 the question of women’s vote and electability was put forward for discussion in the organization. The NMS board asked each regional NMS assembly to debate the matter. In the assembly held for the eastern region around Kristiania, Henny Dons, a young female schoolteacher, attended the meeting on behalf of NMS’ women’s magazine *Missionslæsning for Kvindeforeninger* (Mission Reading for Women’s Groups), at the request of the magazine’s editor, Bolette Gjør. Dons afterward reported to the magazine’s readers that the men who opposed women’s vote had said it would go against God’s word, in particular two biblical verses that they took to be authored by the Apostle Paul: “But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence” in 1 Timothy 2:12, and “Let your women keep silence in the churches” in 1 Corinthians 14:34. These epistles both refer back to the creation story in Genesis as justification, arguing that God created the man first and the woman second: “For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman” (1 Timothy 2:13–14); “For the man is not of the woman: but the woman of the man. Neither was the man created for the woman; but the woman for the man” (1 Corinthians 11:8–9). Dons commended their argument that God’s word must be the definitive guide. But, she wrote approvingly, many male delegates at the meeting had clarified “that Paul in these verses never thought or spoke about the administration of mission societies”; instead, when he said that women must be “silent” he was referring to “women’s behavior in public church services.”² Though she did not report it afterward, during the meeting itself she stood up, asked to speak, and reminded the meeting that in other places dissatisfied women had simply formed their own mission societies.³

2 *Missionslæsning for Kvindeforeninger* 1903, 57–58. This mission periodical can be found in the Mission Archives, Stavanger.

3 As recorded in the minutes from the meeting, printed in NMS’ magazine *Norsk Missionstidende* 1903, 2–3. This mission periodical can be found in the Mission Archives, Stavanger.

Following the regional assembly debates, the NMS governing board sent out a proposal to the whole organization.⁴ I imagine the 30-year-old Henny Dons receiving the 35-page document with its closely spaced Gothic lettering and poring over it. The nine men on the board stated that, on the one hand, there were several arguments in favor of women's vote and electability, including the extent of women's grassroots involvement and their contributions to the organization. On the other hand, there was "only one single objection" that had any significance, but "if justified, it would be *decisive*." That objection was that the Apostle Paul required women to "be silent in the assembly" in 1 Corinthians 14:34–35 and 1 Timothy 2:12, and that he did so on the basis of "certain *foundational relations in the origins of humankind*" (NMS 1904, 18–19, orig. emph.). They spelled out these foundational relations: "the man was created first" and "the woman was the first to sin." This order of creation (Adam first, Eve second) formed the backdrop for the rest of their discussion. They argued that the woman cannot "guide" a group, cannot act as "the head" in marriage, cannot have "authority" or "preach God's word" in a congregation, and cannot "teach others." These are all roles that indicate primacy, thus they are roles for men. A woman should instead be a "listener" and "receive" teaching in a church setting (NMS 1904, 19–20). Implicit in their reasoning was the observation that the secondary creation of Eve was a position of being in relation to something else, of being an iteration. And this position of being an iteration had concrete implications for women's language use: they should not "preach" words, but "receive" them.

However, the men on the governing board still thought women could participate in administrative settings such as mission committees, where participants did not teach or preach God's word but instead carried out a *practical action* that was "a *service* for the Lord" (NMS 1904, 7, orig. emph.). They recognized the objection that women would have "authority" if they participated in drawing up organizational rules. However, the board countered that this was not the kind of "authority" that Paul forbade women from exercising. They stated that the Greek word Paul used, "authentein," could be translated as a woman "acting independently and autonomously (autocratically) in relation to the man." Acting independently was a position of primacy, of a "master" or "superior." Mission women who voted or ran for election were not taking on a "master" role, instead they were "*cooperating* with men" (NMS 1904, 22–23, orig. emph.).

4 The proposal, "Cirkulære til Generalforsamlingen i Bergen 1904," was published by NMS in Stavanger. I will cite the document here as NMS 1904. It was also reprinted in *Norsk Missionstidende* 1904, 244–267.

Thus it was also “most decent” that men “give” women the opportunity to exercise this specific influence of voting “*without* [women] having demanded it.” Indeed, they added, “mission women” would “surely be the last to demand their rights” (NMS 1904, 16, orig. emph.).

Against the backdrop of this reading of Paul’s reading of Adam and Eve, the board proposed that women should receive the right to vote in NMS as well as electability to mission group committees and as delegates to the regional assemblies and the general assembly; they suggested that electability to the regional committees might come later. (One board member added a dissenting opinion, saying that women should not be electable at all, based on “the relations that God established in his Word and in nature itself”; NMS 1904, 28.) The board’s proposal was debated by the male delegates at the NMS general assembly for two days. There was some vocal opposition, but many more spoke in support. In the end the proposal was passed with a large majority among the Lutheran men.⁵

3 Reading as Receiving

So far, I have considered men reading the Bible in NMS. But how did women read? There are some clues in the minutes of the monthly meetings of the Female Teachers’ Mission Association (*Lærerinnenenes Misjonsforbund*, or LMF). LMF was a women-only support organization that donated money to NMS and other missions. Henny Dons was actively involved in it during the first decades of the twentieth century, and according to the meeting minutes she often gave talks at the meetings about biblical verses. For example, in 1921 she gave a talk at an LMF meeting in which she read two Bible verses that had “given her Christmas joy,” Luke 15:21 and John 1:13, and said that “if we live under” these verses, “we will *receive* blessing and *become* a blessing.”⁶ These themes of “giving” and “receiving,” and of placing oneself in a spatial configuration with verses (such as “under”), are echoed in many of her other comments. When the LMF women said goodbye to departing female missionaries, the minutes record that Dons “gave” them Bible verses, such as Matthew 10:8 or 1 Corinthians 8:9, by reading these verses out loud to them.⁷ More often, Dons perceived Bible verses that

5 *Norsk Missionstidende* 1904, 344–351, 363–369.

6 Archive of the Female Teachers’ Mission Association (*Lærerinnenenes Misjonsforbund*, hereafter LMF), Referatbøker, Oslo LMF 1911–1929, 6 Jan 1921, orig. emph. The LMF Archive is held in the Mission Archives, Stavanger.

7 LMF, Referatbøker, Oslo LMF 1911–1929, 3 Jan 1914 and 25 Sep 1915.

took on particular meaning for her to be “given” by God, as when she wrote to the NMS General Secretary in 1924 that she had “received” Isaiah 42:16 and that she was passing it on to him as a New Year’s greeting.⁸ Similarly, when she recounted the start of LMF, she said that the first five teachers who started LMF, including her, had “received boldness” from 1 Corinthians 1:27–29 and began “under the promise in Isaiah 60:22.”⁹

When Dons and her female peers were reading the Bible, then, they perceived themselves to be interacting directly with God, being “given” words from God. In this context there was a certain agency in “receiving,” as it connected the women directly to God’s authority, placing them “under” God’s word or “on” God’s word. Through biblical reading they created (or, in their view, God created) an intimate and important mingling of authoritative words and women’s thoughts and bodies, within a larger religious context in which they were materially marked—by virtue of their bodies coded “female”—as being second, an iteration. We see here how the material and the discursive interacted, or rather intra-acted, within these religious feminist subjects.

This attention to receiving and giving marked Dons’ approach to reading the Bible when she published the book *Bibelens Kvinner* (Women of the Bible) in 1928, in her mid-fifties. At this time she was employed by NMS as their Children’s Secretary and the book was written as part of a Bible study program for youth in the Young Women’s/Men’s Christian Association. One of the many women figures she discussed in the book was Eve.

4 Henny Dons Reading Eve in 1928: “What is Deeply Humbling for Us Women”

The young women who gathered in groups to discuss Dons’ book would start their Bible study by attending to the two moments in Genesis when woman was created. First, “male and female” are created at the end of the prose poem in Genesis 1. Under the heading “Created in God’s image,” Dons wrote: “On the Bible’s first page we read about the woman’s elevated origin. ‘And God cre-

8 NMS, Hjemmearkiv 1920–1970, Gen. sek. 90, Inn. brev hjem. 1923–1924, Box 433/4, Dons to Amdahl, 3 Jan 1924.

9 LMF, Referatbøker, Oslo LMF 1911–1929, 26 May 1917. On being “given” verses, see also LMF 1927, 6; LMF, Referatbøker, Oslo LMF 1929–1946, 26 Oct 1930, 5 Nov 1932; LMF, Landsmøtet 1937, Dons to LMF group leaders, 4 May 1937. On women being “under” biblical words or biblical words being “over” women, see also LMF, Referatbøker, Oslo LMF 1911–1929, 26 Aug 1916, and Oslo LMF 1929–1946, 26 Oct 1930.

ated the human in his image, in God's image he created it, male and female he created them'" (1928, 7). Perhaps she was implicitly in dialogue here with Paul, who says man, not woman, was created with "the image and glory of God" (1 Corinthians 11:7). However, she did not highlight her difference with Paul explicitly, instead simply moving on to the second moment dealing with woman's creation. This occurs in the narrative about the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2, after the creation of Adam. Dons says: "In addition God said this about the woman: 'I will create a helper for him [Adam] who is like him.' This shows even more clearly that God from the dawn of creation has given the woman an equally prominent position as the man" (1928, 7). Again, she seems to be in implicit dialogue with Paul, who says woman was created *from* man and *for* man (1 Corinthians 11:8–9)—a different understanding of what it means to be a "helper." Again, however, Dons did not flag this difference between her and Paul, but instead simply asserted that the woman's "helper" role was "equally prominent."

Dons then turned to what she thought of as "the fall" in Genesis 3, that is, "sin" entering the world. As has been common in Christian readings of the biblical creation account, she located this "fall" in the moment in which the woman took the forbidden fruit in Eden, ate it, and gave some to the man. In her commentary, Dons emphasized that the woman and man both sinned, and moreover that all humans sin. She commented: "The third chapter in Genesis is a [...] depiction of sin through all generations and in each person's life. The fall is mine and yours" (1928, 8). But, she continued, the responsibility can be laid more on Eve than on Adam: "What is deeply humbling for us women is that the temptation comes to the man through the woman. And this is repeated through all of humanity's history every day" (1928, 9). Unlike her earlier disagreement with Paul's readings, here she seems to implicitly agree with the argument in 1 Timothy 2 that Eve was deceived, not Adam, and that this has consequences for all women. From her perspective, Eve and all women after her, including Dons herself, are responsible in some way for temptation "com[ing] to the man," and this pattern is "repeated [...] every day."

The creation account in Genesis concludes with God pronouncing three judgments, the consequences of Eve and Adam's actions. Dons dwelled on the judgment over the woman, who was punished with great pain in childbirth and told that her desire would be for her husband, who would rule over her. Dons commented that, as a result, woman became "a tool [...] for the sake of the reproduction of generations" (1928, 65). The judgment, Dons argued, "included an impoverishment of the character of the original woman, and this impoverishment is inherited by all of humanity's women," as woman was "placed under the authority of the man, [...] given a slave spirit, whose desire does not reach

higher than to please the man. But this is not how the woman was created" (1928, 9). In other words, Dons drew a distinction between what she saw as the woman's original character, created "in God's image" as the man's important "helper," versus what she saw as woman's post-judgment "impoverished" character. Drawing into her argument the figure of the "slave," Dons argued that God's judgment transformed the woman's prominent role as "helper" to one resembling a "slave" who wanted only to please the man. In Dons' reading, then, Eve—and all women after her—were here placed under the rule of men, and while "the condition of slavery is the woman's punishment" (1928, 9), this state of affairs is also a more general "curse over humanity" (1928, 16).

The curse over the snake was also of interest to Dons. In this curse God says that the woman's human descendants will strike snakes on the head, and snakes will strike humans at the heel. Dons did not read this literally as a description of humans and snakes having the ability to kill each other. Rather, she followed the history of Christian interpretation and suggested that the woman's offspring was Jesus and that the snake was Satan. She commented that this curse was actually a "promise" from God, namely the promise that the woman's offspring, Jesus, would crush the snake, Satan. This action would, in Dons' view, lead to "salvation" for humanity (1928, 10). This was significant to her because it meant that Eve not only brought sin into the world but also, through her offspring, the promise of salvation. As Dons put it: "In this way the woman was allowed to be the bearer of the promise" (1928, 11). While she still portrayed life under the curse more negatively for women than men, Dons introduced some nuance into this picture by attaching a promise to the woman.

The creation account in Genesis ends with God expelling the humans from the garden. For Dons, however, the overarching story did not end there. She wrote: "one day the woman was found" who would fulfill the promise (1928, 29). This woman was Mary, mother of Jesus, about whom the angel said: "Blessed are you among women" (Dons 1928: 30). Dons argued that in the moment Mary gave birth to Jesus, "the curse over women is transformed through Jesus Christ into blessing" (1928, 30), mirroring God's original blessing over the male and female humans he created. In her view, the coming of Jesus changed the existential state of women. Dons (1928, 65) now drew into her argument the stock figures of "the heathen" and "the Jews," as well as quoting Paul explicitly:

Against the saying of the heathen that 'a man's life is worth more than a thousand women's,' and a fairly similar perception among Jews at the time of Jesus, Christianity places its saying: There is no difference [...] 'Here is neither Jew nor Greek, here is neither slave nor free, here is neither man nor woman, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' [...] Galatians 3:27–28.

She also drew in the stereotyped figure of “the Muhammedan” (the Muslim), arguing that the cursed state of woman being dominated by man could still be observed in certain areas of the world: “out in the big heathen and Muhammedan world the woman still sits in the deepest denigration and the thickest darkness” (1928, 103). But, in her view, whenever women become Christian they were set “free” by Jesus, and “this freedom is our holy right as women of the new covenant” (1928, 103). We see, then, how her reading was formed by, and formed, a conjured cast of both more-than-human characters and stock figures distributed throughout history and around the world in her cosmic imaginary—the woman, the man, Satan, Jesus, the slave, the Jew, the “heathen,” the “Muhammedan,” the Christian.

When Dons argued that Christian women were “free,” and that Christian men and women were “one,” this seems to have meant to her that there was no difference in status. But she did not think it meant having the same tasks: “In the life and work of the congregation there is a deep need for the natural gift that God has given the woman—motherliness. This is what is simultaneously strong and mild in the female nature, which gives her the ability to carry on, keep vigil and wait, suffer and sacrifice” (1928, 97). Just as she perceived women to “receive” words from God, then, she also perceived them to receive effects in and on their bodies, such as the “gift” of making their bodies and dispositions “motherly.” Since, like many of the middle-class female teachers in her circles, Dons herself was not married and did not have any children, we can assume that she was referring to “motherliness” in a figurative sense, rather than a literal one. But she saw a development in woman’s motherly role: first Adam and Eve were told to multiply and that was “good”; then woman became a childbearing “tool” under the curse; but after Jesus woman could beneficially use a natural, God-given gift of motherliness, which, Dons argued, filled an important need in the Christian social world. A little later in her Bible study Dons observed that “even today we are working on these questions about the position of the Christian woman” (1928, 68), commenting that the reason the questions had not yet been resolved was that “it is difficult for the man to voluntarily give up the power he has had over the woman since the fall. And it has not been easy for the woman to make use of the entire grace that is at her disposal” (1928, 67). Both men and women, in her view, might still relate to each other in the hierarchical way that was introduced by God’s judgment, rather than accept that they were now “set on an equal footing” (1928, 67).

5 Reading as Arranging

Let me return to the question of how Henny Dons read the Bible as a Christian woman and how this helps us describe her as a religious feminist subject. At this point we can notice another operation: Dons approached reading as “seriation” (Bandak 2015, 51). Andreas Bandak has discussed Christian “series” using the example of a sermon given by an Eastern Catholic priest in Syria. In the sermon, the priest presented a series of exemplary historical figures, moving from one to the next. Bandak argues that the challenge to the listener was to understand how this series could function as an example for—and be continued in—the listener’s own life. In this sense, “the example is not finished” (2015, 57). Dons too produced series; in her case, of Bible verses. The groups and strings of Bible verses that she assembled had the effect of relating biblical words to each other in new ways, making new connections among words as well as among figures: “Jewish” men and “heathen” men then Jesus; the “Muhammedan” woman then the “Christian” woman; Eve then Henny Dons. As she reorganized relations between biblical words, she could also reorganize relations between gendered bodies, imagined human figures around the world, and more-than-human forces. Again it seems to me that this configuration is not fully captured by the frame of self-cultivation but seems instead to be better described as a distributed circuit. Dons did not see herself as a subject that was made primarily by herself but rather by forces and figures that shaped her. For example, because of the material resemblance between Eve’s body and her own—namely the “femaleness” of these bodies—Dons knows that she must humble herself; in this case, Eve’s body is making up hers. Some of these series, then, such as the one that led from Eve to Dons, could not be materially escaped, but must be received. In Dons’ experience, she lived as a religious feminist subject in series that were both received and arranged.

6 Henny Dons Reading Eve around 1953: “Woman’s Place”

About 25 years after she published her Bible study, Dons recorded another reading of Eve. At this point she was in her late seventies and had retired from the Norwegian Mission Society. However, she was still invited as a speaker by Christian groups, and she saved a stack of notebooks containing handwritten notes for her talks (which later ended up in the Mission Archive in Stavanger). In one notebook, likely from the early 1950s, she wrote down notes for a talk about Eve, titled: “Woman’s place in the Kingdom of God.”¹⁰ In this talk Dons again

10 Archive of the Mission School for Women (*Misjonsskolen for Kvinner*, hereafter MFK),

started with the creation of “male and female” and emphasized that the first humans were both created in God’s image, were blessed and told to multiply. However, this time she did not mention the woman’s beneficial role as “helper” as she had done before. Instead, she used new terms for the relation between the woman and the man, saying they were created for “community and cooperation with God and each other.”¹¹

She then reconsidered the “fall.” In her earlier reading in 1928, Dons stated that both humans sinned but that Eve sinned first. In her talk in the 1950s, she shifted her attention. Instead of focusing on Eve’s action of eating the fruit and giving it to Adam, she focused instead on the two responses that the humans gave when God confronted them afterward. The woman responded that the snake tricked her and she ate of the fruit. Dons commented: “The woman immediately admits and confesses her sin to God. But at the same time she accuses the Snake as the seducer. She told the whole truth without excuse, and thereby she broke with the sin.”¹² In Dons’ view, the woman’s statement was a confession of how she acted against God’s will, and thus she “places herself completely under God’s power.”¹³ Dons suggested that Eve’s orientation toward God might be called belief, concluding: “The woman is the first to believe in God [...] therefore Eve can be called mother of all those who believe [...] just as Abraham is called ‘father of those who believe.’”¹⁴ She was in dialogue here with Galatians 3:29, where Paul refers to Christian believers as children of God and as Abraham’s descendants. Dons’ re-reading argued that Christian believers were not just Abraham’s children, but, before him, Eve’s children, tracing their lineage back to her original moment of belief in Eden. Again, she was arranging biblical verses and figures in new series.

Dons viewed the man’s response to God differently. When God confronted him, Adam responded that the woman, whom God gave him, gave him the fruit, and he ate. Dons observed: “The man excuses himself and blames both God and the woman, but he does not mention the Snake.”¹⁵ In Dons’ view Adam blamed God (because God gave him Eve) and Eve (because she gave him the fruit), but not the snake, who, in Dons’ symbolic reading, was Satan, and thus the true

Box 72/5, Notebook titled “Guds ord til kvinnen / Kvinnens stilling i menigheten” by Henny Dons, section titled “Kvinnens plass i Guds rike.” The notebook is not dated, but based on references to current events was probably written in the early 1950s.

11 Ibid., 1.

12 Ibid., 2.

13 Ibid., 3.

14 Ibid., 3–4.

15 Ibid., 2.

responsible party. Adam's blaming God instead of the snake was a wrong assignment of blame, Dons argued. Recall that in Dons' reading in 1928 she agreed with the claim in 1 Timothy 2 that Eve was the one who was deceived, not Adam. By contrast, in her reading in the 1950s she dwelled on the difference between the two humans' responses to God and concluded that the woman confessed and demonstrated belief in God while the man misplaced blame and excused himself. Dons elaborated that it even seems the man implicitly "placed himself on Satan's side by not accusing him as the seducer," contrary to the woman's clear accusation against the snake.¹⁶

Here it seems that Dons replaced one hierarchy (Eve was more fully deceived than Adam, so she is more sinful) with another (Eve confessed more fully than Adam, so she is more faithful). From Dons' perspective, this replacement, or re-reading, seemed to allow her to move away from the experience of finding the creation account "deeply humbling for us women," as she put it in 1928. Instead, by highlighting the importance of how humans respond to God, she was in the early 1950s emphasizing how Eve placed herself under God's power, thus providing an original model of belief for all her human descendants.

Dons further speculated that when Eve responded that the snake tricked her, she made a bitter enemy of the snake. In Dons' view the snake was Satan, and so the woman "made Satan [...] her enemy and opponent for all of time."¹⁷ Dons saw this enmity theme confirmed in God's pronouncement that there would be enmity between the snake's offspring and the woman's offspring. Ever since this moment in Eden, Dons suggested, there has been an ongoing battle: Eve versus the snake, that is, women versus Satan. Just as in her reading in 1928, she again found a "promise" hidden in the curse of the snake: "The woman's offspring shall crush the head of the Snake,"¹⁸ which she read as a foretelling of Jesus crushing sin or Satan. She added: "Satan [the snake] is himself present and hears the Lord pronounce these words about the woman's elevated destiny."¹⁹ The curse ends with the statement that the snake's offspring will strike the woman's offspring, and this sentiment was folded into Dons' further elaboration: "from this moment Satan will do everything in his power to hinder the woman from fulfilling her elevated destiny. He will do everything to oppress her and fight against her."²⁰

16 Ibid., 5.

17 Ibid., 2.

18 Ibid., 3.

19 Ibid., 5.

20 Ibid.

Dons then commented on God's judgment of the woman. Contrary to her earlier reading, she now suggested that when God pronounced that woman would be ruled by man, this was a foretelling of the method that Satan would use to fight against the woman:

It was a small step for Satan to use as his tool *the man* who was closest to the woman [...] Through the man, Satan would be able to attack the woman in the most sensitive area. She must be cowed and made into nothing. She must be treated in such a way that her *faith in God* and her elevated calling and dignity will die in her. [...] Therefore the woman had as her opponents both her husband and Satan.²¹

Recall that in 1928 Dons thought that God's pronouncement that men would have authority over women was part of God's punishment of women. However, in her re-reading in the early 1950s, she instead thought that this pronouncement was God's foretelling of how Satan would continue to attack women. In Dons' view in the 1950s, then, when men rule over women, Satan advances in his long-standing battle against Eve. Similarly, while in 1928 she argued that when the woman handed the fruit to the man she acted as Satan's tool to make the man sin (that is, to destroy the man), Dons now refused this reading, saying that: "To portray the woman as a tool that Satan uses to destroy the man is a completely heathen thought."²² We see here that she briefly draws in the stock figure of the "heathen" again as a foil for its perceived opposite, the "Christian." She argued that the Christian way of thinking was to recognize that when the man rules over the woman, *he* is the one who is Satan's "tool," destroying the woman. Again she seems to replace one hierarchy with another in her re-reading: while she had previously agreed that the woman acted as Satan's tool, she now argued that the man was Satan's tool instead.

What did life under "grace" look like in her re-reading in the 1950s? It was more complicated. In 1928 she reasoned that woman brought sin into the world and that God punished her by causing her to be dominated by the man, but that when Jesus conquered sin the effect of God's judgment ceased so that women should no longer be ruled by men. In her re-reading around 1953, on the other hand, she argued that the reason for men's domination of women was different. It was not God's punishment. Instead, it began when the woman accused

²¹ Ibid., 5–6, orig. emph.

²² Ibid., 3.

the snake (that is, Satan), making an enemy of him. Following this moment of confession, God promised that the woman's offspring would bring salvation, and this set the scene for a historic battle between women and Satan. The battle would be played out by Satan using men to dominate women. Even after Jesus, Dons argued, this battle continued, so that men still ruled over women. The picture is nuanced, though, because Dons also affirmed, using the words of Paul: "In Christ woman as man is '*a new creation*' (2 Corinthians 5:17)."²³ And in her view Jesus never set different requirements for women and men, but instead "he spoke to humans as humans."²⁴ In other words, her final picture this time was more complicated than in her 1928 reading. After Jesus, women and men were new creations, but at the same time the battle between Eve and Satan was still ongoing. This view was perhaps more realistic in its assessment of the difficulties Dons still faced in trying to address gender relations in her own Christian circles.

7 Reading as Iterating

Dons demonstrated a tendency to read and re-read Eve, and this in turn effected a repeated re-reading of herself as woman. A repeated use of Bible verses is common in Christian communities as verses are constantly connected to new contexts and re-read (Tomlinson 2010, 2014). Matt Tomlinson argues that this action of repetition is "not quite change and not quite continuity, but rather an ongoing act of transformative reengagement" (2014, 166). In Dons' reading and re-reading of Eve, she seemed to approach both reading about being a woman, and being a woman, as iteration. She not only read iteratively, she also noticed the iterations inherent in the creation of Eve: Eve was created by someone else, after someone else. And women after Eve came out of a series of generations of women, iterations of Eve. When Dons in her late seventies raised a question about one aspect of these iterations, namely the positioning of Adam first and Eve second, she did so not by questioning the first-second order, but by asking whether the order should be inverted so that Eve was first (to believe) and Adam second. In her repetition of this series she was creating something new as well as maintaining the same overall structure. Thus while she approached reading as iteration, and woman as iteration, this does not mean that reading generated either an obvious change or, on the other hand, a straightforward

²³ Ibid., 6, orig. emph.

²⁴ Ibid., 6–7, orig. emph.

continuity. Rather, her iterated re-reading, as a core part of her Christian feminist subjectivity, produced ongoing, transformative reengagements.

8 Conclusion: Being Created Woman

For Dons, her female body was created, and this was a creation of “woman.” Moreover, this creation was an iteration of another creation, that of the first woman, Eve, who again was a created iteration of the first human, Adam. Dons elaborated the position of “being created woman” as an iteration, or as something received from someone else. In her attention to the multiple entities involved, there is a curious overlap, as mentioned in the introduction, between her religious feminism a century ago and today’s conversation on feminist new materialism. Dons’ repeated re-readings might perhaps correspond with Barad’s argument that performing gender is a process of iterative intra-activity, given the many bodily and linguistic forms that Dons was working with, in, and on. The intra-activity of some of these forms—God, biblical words, bodies—constantly iterated the creation of her as a woman as she “received” words from God in her reading and “gave” words to others, and was “on” and “under” words. This resonates with Barad’s view of bodies as “material-discursive phenomena” (2008, 141). For Dons this intra-activity was both something she “received” and that moved far beyond her control, as non-self actors determined who and how she was as a woman: God creating her, Jesus changing her status, Satan working through her to destroy the man or through the man to attack her. She was also connected to other human figures in history and around the world, being formed by her ancestor Eve’s belief, by the angel’s blessing on Mary, and by her view of various foil figures: “heathen” women, “the slave,” “the Jews,” or “the Muhammedan world.” I have argued that against this background the concept of self-cultivation or self-realization (Mahmood 2005) does not fully capture the religious feminist subject that was “being created woman” and that emerged through Dons’ readings of Eve. Rather, Dons was concerned with a more distributed and iterative formation of “woman” by and among multiple material and discursive entities, intra-acting in a circuit. We might say that her readings show us a series of “woman-word operations” in which words and body together operated as a distributed, collective ethical subject.

While Henny Dons was part of the feminist “first wave” in Northern Europe, her readings of Eve give us a glimpse into the complex questions that were still unresolved after Christian women gained the vote. Dons’ encounter with men’s reading of Eve and her own enfranchisement in NMS in 1904 seem to have had limited impact on her view of the female body, though they formed the start-

ing point for her contrary readings over the course of her life. She continued to grapple with Eve, placing herself as a woman reader not just in a regional history of advocating for “secular” rights, but also, and more importantly to her, in an imagined global geography of “Christians” and “heathen,” in a history spanning from Eve through Mary to herself, as well as in a created cosmos that was attacked by Satan and sustained by God. However, while she was employed by NMS and shared her changing readings of Eve in talks to other Christian women, the organization itself does not seem to have been directly affected by her or other women’s discussions of the Bible. The governing board’s statement in 1904 that women ought to “receive” words and not “preach” them had been based on the “foundational relations” they saw between Adam and Eve at the original moment of creation: man was created first, woman second. The injunction on women preaching held sway in the organization until 1989, when it was agreed that women could be ordained as pastors (much later than the same step had been taken in the Lutheran Church of Norway, in 1961). Perhaps this long delay was also partly the outcome of Dons’ emphasis on reading as “receiving” and “being created” in relation to others: her stance matched the view of the men on the NMS governing board that women ought to “receive” words. In this way, Dons’ religious feminism, and her use of reading as part of this feminism, had contradictory effects in the world.

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