BOOK REVIEW

Gender Justice in Muslim-Christian Readings: Christian and Muslim Women in Norway: Making Meaning of Texts from the Bible, the Koran, and the Hadith, by Anne Hege Grung. Brill Rodopi, 2016. 475 pp., Pb., \$84 ISBN 978-90-04-30669-1

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Anne Hege Grung's latest work, *Gender Justice in Muslim-Christian Readings*, maps the extended meaning-making encounters that happen when Muslim and Christian women are invited to encounter each other's texts, cultures, traditions, and selves. Weaving thorough qualitative research and contemporary feminist and theological theory, Grung's book provides its readers with an excellent model for assessing the impact of interreligious encounter among individuals. Grung's guiding line of inquiry asked whether Christian and Muslim women differed in their interpretive strategies when reading their canonical scriptures, and whether it was possible for these women to create a shared agency in the interpretive act (4).

Grung selected 10 women—5 Christians and 5 Muslims—varying in age, intrareligious belief, and cultural backgrounds, to take part in 6 discussion sessions around the texts of the Hagar/Hajar narratives and Sura 4: 34 and 1 Timothy 2: 8-15. Because of Christianity and Islam's history of male-dominated and patriarchal interpretations of canonical scriptures, Grung intentionally only selected women to participate in her project. What results from her study is a fascinating and enlightening perspective from these women: they all claim gender justice as inherent to their religious traditions and texts and submit those texts to scrutiny, analysis, and re-interpretation to fit that fundamental claim (45). Even though the women in the study relate to their sacred texts in different ways, they agree on the fundamental principle of gender equality in both Christianity and Islam.

Grung begins her book with a chapter on her guiding theoretical and contextual perspectives. Ultimately, Grung seeks to employ “double hermeneutics” or the process of “interpreting the interpreter” to analyze feminist dialogue encounter across transreligious lines (19). Grung prefers the term “transreligious” to “interreligious” in order to avoid characterizing one religion as static, which Western Christians

are especially prone to do with Islam (27). Even though Grung selected women from the Norwegian context, that context is continually blurred, re-defined, and questioned as the women navigate the complexity of their differing cultural backgrounds. Perhaps most important to this introductory theoretical chapter is Grung's analysis of the way the women will use anachronisms in their dialogue. The women Grung selected have basic religious literacy in their religious traditions, but none of them are professional interpreters. So the use of anachronisms in interpretation "may be a way to relate morally to the texts as contemporary readers" (57). This important insight grounds the women's act of interpretation as authoritative and meaningful even if they make interpretive moves that professionals may initially seek to critique, question, or dismiss.

Chapter 3 sets out Grung's methods and tools used to conduct the dialogue and her qualitative research process. Regarding the texts chosen, Grung notes that she selected them because they were concerned with women and corresponded to each other across religious lines (102). She also chose some of the most problematic and challenging passages from both traditions as they relate to the concept of gender justice. Grung chose these difficult texts because of the desire to construct a shared agency of interpretation between Christians and Muslims on the basis of gender justice, and to highlight that it is indeed possible to confront difficult and contentious texts in a dialogical, transreligious space (104). This chapter also outlines each individual participant, with names changed to protect privacy, and also provides the reader with an overview of how the six meetings were structured and moderated. Grung discusses her role as the researcher, noting her intention to remain uninvolved in the group dialogue process in order to study the meaning-making process of the participants. This is something Grung does quite successfully, and only at one point in the entire dialogue process does she interject a question.

Chapter 4 outlines the first meeting of the group, highlighting the different ways the Christian and Muslim participants relate to their canonical texts. Overall, the Christians felt more reluctant and selective of their use of the Bible, while the Muslims felt a strong connection to the Koran as a text that can be interpreted and reinterpreted as an aid for improving the situation of women (146). As the women began the meaning-making process in this first discussion, the Muslim participants had an easier time relating Christianity as close to their own faith, while the Christians participants struggled to identify doctrinal support to include Islam as close to the Christian view of the

world (169). As the dialogue continued, the women created a “web of meaning-making.” This web enabled them to weave together texts, contemporary experiences, and cultural perspectives (168).

Chapter 5 details the dialogues related to the Hagar/Hajar narratives. Grung transcribed the conversations among the women and provides her reader with excerpts of those conversations, analyzing them throughout the book. The initial conversation generated around the narratives helped to clarify the differences of the figures in the traditions, an important first step in the process of creating a shared interpretive space (181). The women also tried to navigate the difference and overlap of culture and religion as they discussed the troubling circumstances of Hagar/Hajar’s story. Most interestingly, Grung observes that in the dialogue, the women often merged the two narratives of the Bible and the Hadith, treating them as one. For Grung, this may signal the appearance of a transcontextual space (212). But even though some kind of transcontextual space is created in the dialogue, the Islamic text is signalled as the distinguishing factor. The dialogue becomes heated and polemical at times, but the women continually expressed the desire to remain in conversation with one another as they navigate the complexities of interpreting the Hagar/Hajar narratives.

Chapter 6 analyses the dialogues of Sura 4: 34 and 1 Timothy 2: 8–15. Here are the English translations of both texts:

Men are in charge of women, because Allah hath made one of them to excel the other, and because they spend of their property (for the support of women). So good women are the obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah hath guarded. As for those from whom ye fear rebellion, admonish them and banish them to beds apart, and scourge them. Then, if they obey you, seek no a way against them. Lo! Allah is ever High, Exalted, Great. (Sura 4:34 qtd. in Grung 2016, 275–276)

I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument; also that the women should dress themselves modestly and decently in suitable clothing, not with their hair braided, or with gold, pearls, or expensive clothes, but with good works, as is proper for women who profess reverence for God. Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty. (1 Timothy 2:8-15 qtd. in Grung 2016, 275–276)

In the conversation generated around these texts, the Christian women show a commitment to the ideal of gender equality, and are thus highly critical of the Pauline passage. Both of the Christian participants ultimately rejected the Biblical passage as authoritative because of its failure to align with their fundamental conviction of gender equality within the Christian tradition (292). The Christian women asserted their authority as readers and faithful Christians as license to reject texts that are outdated or unable to speak to their fundamental Christian convictions. The Muslim women, on the other hand, worked to carefully re-interpret the Qur'anic text in favour of gender equality. Instead of reading the Sura as an assertion of male authority, both the Christian and Muslim participants worked toward an interpretation that reads the passage as calling for mutual support between men and women (310). By engaging the Sura together, the women demonstrated the emergence of shared agency to create meaning with the aim of gender equality and justice.

Grung notes that this dialogue encounter signals a shift in how the participants interact with one another. In the Hagar/Hajar discussions, the Christian participants focused more readily on differences, while the Muslim participants focused on similarities. Now, in the discussion of these prescriptive texts from the Sura and Pauline writings, the participants shifted toward a dialogical process focused on mutual understanding and the desire to understand one another better (329). Grung suggests that this shift in dialogue reveals how the Christian participants change their views of their Muslim co-participants: "the texts of the other have shifted from representing difference to providing resources" (376). This relates to Grung's earlier point that there is a Western tendency to view Islam as a static religious tradition. As the Christian women engaged in dialogue with their Muslim co-participants, they learned to recognize the dynamic reality of Islam as they negotiated interpretation and meaning making with one another.

Throughout the dialogue process with these texts, overall the Christian women were much more willing to critique the texts themselves, while the Muslim women challenged the *interpretation* of the texts. Both Christian and Muslim women recognized the danger inherent in each text and the need for responsible and proactive reinterpretations of these dangerous texts (375). Interestingly, the Muslim participants recognized their responsibility in the act of claiming correct interpretations of the Qur'anic texts, while the Christian women's rejection of the Biblical text did not include any kind of call to action or responsibility (400).

Perhaps one of the most significant takeaways from this discussion on Sura 4: 34 and 1 Timothy 2: 8–15 occurred when the Christian women began to admit that the Biblical text is not merely an outdated ghost of the past, but presents a current challenge to women's equality within the Christian tradition (427). This insight occurs when the Christian women expanded their context beyond Norway alone. Throughout the process, the Muslim women continually navigated among a plurality of contexts, reflective of their own plural identities as Pakistani Norwegians, Iranian Norwegians, and more. But the Christian women mainly relied on their dominant Christian Lutheran Norwegian background to assess the texts. The discussion ends on a poignant note when the women participants remark that gender justice is not simply about the rights of women, but must also work to redefine the responsibilities of men in the project of gender equality (431).

The final chapter concludes with Grung bringing together gender and women's issues with cultural and religious identity. Grung notes that often these two realities are separated by scholars, but if they were brought together that would "represent a significant gain in the scholarly work for gender justice" (439). This coupling of gender justice with religious analysis is perhaps the most significant achievement of Grung's project. Grung demonstrates that the quest for gender justice is in fact central to Christian and Muslim women's religious identities, and as such, must be central to our own religious identities. Grung's book is a call to religious scholars to take her participants' insights to heart: that gender justice is central to both Christianity and Islam. Though the book is long, it is well worth the read for those who seek to advance interreligious and transreligious dialogue. If one hopes to construct a dialogue that is true to the Christian and Islamic faiths, one would do well to place women in the centre of that dialogue, leading the way toward gender justice, which is ultimately justice for all.