

INTERSECTIONAL GRASSROOTS RECEPTION: The Use of the Bible in Discourses of Gender Equality¹

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ABSTRACT: This article explores how religious Latvian women draw on the Bible to discuss gender equality, examining the construction of their theologically based arguments and the conceptualization of gender equality within these discussions. The study investigates factors such as age, denomination, and education level that may influence their opinions. The findings reveal a "biblical reception at the grassroots," diverging from official religious community settings. Women, despite general assumptions or stereotypes, independently navigate gender roles through both religious texts and personal interpretations. The analysis applies gender theory, intersectionality, and reception history, emphasizing the role of biblical sources in shaping gender equality discourses. In the unique Latvian context, marked by a recent reversal of women's ordination and cultural tensions with the Western world, these women's perspectives on the Bible and gender equality offer distinctive and compelling insights.

KEYWORDS: Bible Hermeneutics, Gender, Christianity in Latvia, Intersectionality, Reception Studies.

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to explore what kinds of concepts, sources and strategies Christian Latvian women can use when discussing gender equality and religion. Using material collected in interviews, we focus on what these women say about the Bible and how they employ, understand and interpret different biblical texts that they consider authoritative in relation to gender equality.

In general, women can use a wide range of strategies, concepts and arguments when asked to talk about gender equality and religion. The interviews we analyse in this article were conducted with Latvian women of different Christian denominations and ages. In them, the informants seem to be creative and independent, but there is also a notable loyalty to ecclesiastical and/or scriptural authorities. We present and discuss some of the instances in which they use biblical texts, or more vaguely, “the Bible,” in their arguments. This discursive strategy often serves to legitimise their own point of view, sometimes in a way that is contrary to the official stance of their respective church. Our starting point is the consideration that their perspectives represent a kind of grassroots reception of the Bible, and the key approach we use to analyse this is contextual biblical studies, as it offers rich insights into how people read the Bible.

In terms of material and methodology, in this article, we focus on the interviews with Latvian Christian women as a case study to address questions of how gender equality is legitimised, opposed or otherwise discursively navigated. This study is part of the broader research project “Religion and Gender Equality: Baltic and Nordic Developments,” in which the research team interviewed representatives of different religions and denominations in the Baltic and Nordic states. The interviews were conducted in 2021. In Latvia, members of the three largest Christian denominations were interviewed – 12 Lutheran, 11 Catholic, 12 Orthodox – as well as 5 Muslim women. The women invited to participate in the study were of different ages, marital statuses and places of residence, and they had various occupations. Participants were mostly selected by snowball sampling but were occasionally approached with the support of congregational leaders.

For this study, we chose the interviews with Latvian Lutheran and Catholic women because they contain significantly more material on the issue of biblical interpretation than the responses of the Orthodox women, and also because the latter interviews were conducted in a slightly different way in relation to the Bible. Also, an interfaith comparison is beyond the scope of this article, so we did not use the responses of Muslim women. The names of all participants have already been anonymised at the co-researcher level; thus, this article refers to participants by pseudonym, denomination and age.

The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews lasting approximately one hour. In them, the women were asked to answer questions about their own and their community’s religious practices and understandings of gender and gender equality. Among other things, the women were asked whether any texts, particularly biblical texts, played a special role in their understanding of gender (Llewellyn 2015, 2017, 569-588). Significantly, the Latvian Lutheran and Catholic women referred to biblical texts even when no specific questions about the Bible were asked. Thus, our primary aim here is to analyse their responses in the context of biblical hermeneutics, for which we employ methods borrowed from the social sciences. A separate focus on the discursive uses of the Bible in the empirical sources shows how women can navigate gender and religion in their own creative ways.

FRAMEWORKS OF ANALYSIS: BIBLICAL RECEPTION AND GENDER EQUALITY

The conventional aim of biblical studies has been to understand the texts in their original historical context (Green 2010, Fiorenza 1994, 443-369). Initially, this approach was a way of freeing the texts from their dogmatic or churchly authority and of interpreting biblical texts as historical documents alongside other ancient texts. In recent years, however, the discipline has undergone a paradigm shift, with an increased focus on what has been called “biblical reception.” The recent *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* is one example of this. Part of this shift has taken place in response to Black, queer, postcolonial, feminist and other voices that have shown how historical-critical approaches are not value-neutral. This shift also challenges the myth of “original meanings:” texts are now studied within their original contexts but also in the context of the various meanings that have been ascribed to them throughout the ages. The impetus for this shift has come partly from biblicists and partly from scholars in other fields of theology or religious studies.

Before this shift, studies focusing on supposed early reception(s) of the Bible were a high priority in the discipline. The writings of so-called “Church Fathers,” who were closer in time to the authors of the Bible, were closely examined to find clues to the “original meaning” of the texts (Oden 1998). There have been many studies of the theological use of biblical concepts and sometimes texts, but these have often been conducted by scholars outside the discipline of biblical studies. There is a growing interest among biblical scholars in the reception of the Bible in the fine arts and literature, as well as a search for biblical references in politics and popular culture (Sherwood 2014, 2008, Crossley 2022a, 2022b). Within the discipline, many volumes on biblical reception have been published by various university presses and distinguished journals around the world. There is even a multi-volume encyclopaedia series (published by DeGruyter) that has contributed both to defining and challenging this overall approach as it is practised in biblical scholarship today.

Examining the current situation from a gender-critical perspective reveals that the same masculine bias that permeates biblical texts is reproduced in their historical reception, especially in the early stages. However, if we include art, film or literature in the analysis, other voices can be heard.

One promising tendency of this new contextualised approach is that it brings “real readers” into the conversation, building methodological bridges to other disciplines. This may act as a corrective, but it also opens up a landscape for the creation of broader meanings and a more democratic and inclusive approach to biblical texts. Several studies have initiated a conversation with so-called ordinary readers to find out how they construct the meaning of the given biblical texts. These new studies may also bring about a better gender balance in terms of who is granted authority to give “valid” interpretations of the Bible, as more women are invited to participate in the dialogue. For example, in the Umajaa project, women from impoverished communities in South Africa were invited to interpret the Bible in the context of their struggles for living, and the researchers used a contextual biblical studies approach to privilege these women’s epistemological views. They found that when widows in Kenya read about the widows in the Bible, they interpreted their own experiences in light of the text (Maseno and Kartzow 2010).

Beyond the expansion of the empirical material in biblical studies, new methods have also been introduced (Ipsen 2009, Llewellyn 2015, 2017). In his book, *The Bible and Lay People*, Andrew Village argues that the academy has focused more on the implied reader, forgetting about the real reader (Village 2007, 1-11). His quantitative empirical research with members of the Church of England measures differing levels of literalism, obtaining results on how, for example, education influences the reader of the Bible. Thus, the next step is to ask how the results of these kinds of empirical studies might serve as a corrective to the hierarchies of

knowledge that have previously dominated biblical studies. Our interest has, therefore, been listening to women from different denominations, educational backgrounds and ages and assessing their strategies of biblical interpretation. In doing so, we hope to move the discipline closer to real readers and find other avenues for our own future biblical studies.

Another member of the ReliGen research team, Anne Hege Grung, has conducted a study in Norway that also develops the focus group method employed here and includes Muslim women and Islamic texts (Grung 2015). Studies like this seem to imply a genuine curiosity in this question: How do the diverse readers included in these different studies make sense of the various religious texts? In these studies, the aim is not to compare these texts with what the established historical-critical scholarship has said about them, nor is it to judge whether they are in line with authoritative religious interpretations. Rather, it is to find out what role the text plays in a particular contemporary context and how real readers navigate, challenge or comply with the Bible – and in the case of Grung’s study, also the Quran – in a contemporary context.

A text does not come with an inherent meaning; it is up to the interpreting community to establish what it means, at least if we follow Stanley Fish (1980). Accordingly, impoverished individuals in South Africa or Norwegian Christian women are fully able to construct the meaning of the text (for them). Therefore, examining how the Latvian women interviewed use the Bible contributes to our understanding of these various meaning(s) within the interdisciplinary field of biblical studies. Moreover, in listening to what these women say about the Bible, we are able to learn a whole lot about their values and attitudes. Their hermeneutical strategies help us better understand their approach to gender equality, and examining this also enhances scholarly knowledge of the overall meaning potential of these biblical texts.

Our analytical approach to gender and, hence, gender equality in this article comes from intersectional theory (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall 2013). We do not consider “a woman” to be a stable, static category; rather, we are aware of differences, such as age, social status, level of education and religious adherence. Over the last few decades, intersectionality has been increasingly applied as a useful lens for the study of religion, theology and the Bible (Fiorenza 2009, Kartzow 2010). At the Society for Biblical Literature’s 2019 International Meeting, the president advocated for using intersectionality in the field more often, which received some interesting responses (Yee 2020, Cuéllar 2021, Foskett 2021). In other fields, particularly within feminism and race studies, intersectionality has become widespread (Crenshaw 1989, McCall 2005, Davis 2008). The core idea of intersectional theory is the focus on the intersections between different categories of identity and hierarchy: a woman is not only a woman; she always belongs to other categories, too, such as race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, social status, etc. Understanding how these various categories interact and mutually reinforce (or negotiate with) each other has become the primary interest of intersectionality studies (Kartzow 2017).

Overall, in the material from Latvia, there is a huge variety among the women interviewed, as well as among those who employ the Bible. Since our aim with this article is to present and analyse a few key examples, it is indeed important to look closely at variation and diversity as much as the gathered material allows. It seems that educational level and church belonging play important roles in our material. Age differences also appeared significant; however, in our material, it is difficult to draw any conclusions based on this point. We have not looked into other categories, such as economic background, sexuality or social status, since the interviews were not aimed at gathering this kind of data. Nevertheless, we are aware of the potential influence of these dimensions. Accordingly, we do not aim to reveal “women’s use of the Bible” but rather to point to the various strategies and concepts these women have employed within all their different situations. The grassroots reception we have identified is indeed an intersectional one.

Church Context of the Study

In order to contextualise this study, here is a brief description of the situation in Latvia with regard to churches and gender equality. The majority of Latvian churches belong to the conservative wing of Christianity, encompassing both theological and ethical positions. A recent example of this conservative stance was demonstrated when the leaders of the four largest churches (Lutheran, Catholic, Orthodox and Baptist) publicly issued a joint statement opposing the ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, also known as the Istanbul Convention, in Latvia. They perceived it as a potential threat to Latvian culture and religion. According to this open letter, “the convention does not call for fighting the real causes of violence, but opens up opportunities to impose on Latvia a societal transformation project based on gender ideology” (No author, no date, accessed 2023). The authors of the open letter stress that the Convention does not explain what (stereotyped) gender roles should be changed in order to eradicate violence and thus it enables an overly broad interpretation, potentially ‘endangering the institution of the family.’

The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia has forged its own path in matters of gender: it started to ordain women in 1975, but these ordinations were stopped in 1993. In 2016, the church changed its constitution to clarify that the right of ordination applies to men only. Thus, discussions about gender issues in the church have mostly been related to the issue of female ordination. The reversal of positions on women’s ordination within one of the country’s main religious groups makes Latvia a unique case when addressing religion and gender equality. Interestingly, the church has no theological document to support its arguments in favour of its theological beliefs. The matter of women’s ordination has predominantly been addressed through legal means, such as amending the church constitution, rather than providing a well-defined theological framework or a thorough interpretation of relevant biblical passages. As a result, numerous arguments have emerged, ranging from borrowed ideas from Catholic theology to a reliance by parishioners on the viewpoints of their pastors and church leaders, which comes across explicitly in the interviews. In 2016, the Latvian media reported instances of church leaders making the argument that the same method of biblical interpretation used to justify female ordination also supports gay marriage. This argument implied that such a connection was reason enough to halt the acceptance of women’s ordination. By using this argument, the Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church chose to employ a biblical reception method that, according to the Archbishop’s understanding, means recognising biblical texts as inspired by God (No author 2016a, No author 2016b). Since 2022, the discourse surrounding gender roles and ethical issues has more prominently focused on critiquing the “Western world.” The conversation has been enriched by philosophical insights from Jordan Peterson, a former professor of psychology in Canada, and his concept of postmodern neo-Marxism (Veidemane 2021). In this context, it becomes increasingly vital to explore how ordinary church members develop their own theology and to examine whether they consciously draw upon specific biblical texts as theological sources.

FINDINGS

In the next section of this article, we first present an overview of the types of biblical texts these women employed in the interviews. Second, we examine the extensive material collected on Lutheran and Catholic women and provide a more detailed analysis of their interactions with the Bible. Our presentation is organised around relevant themes, with the aim of identifying the biblical hermeneutics used by different women in these two churches. We also

discuss the role of the Bible in shaping their understanding of gender in general and gender equality in particular.

To achieve this, we address several key questions. First, we explore the participants' habits of reading the Bible. Then, we focus on their understanding of the authority of the Bible, looking for any explicit hermeneutical statements. Additionally, we investigate how the biblical texts are applied to discuss matters of gender. Finally, we offer some concluding observations based on our findings.

We pay attention to intersectionality throughout by considering the social circles to which the research participants belong, especially in terms of their denomination, age group and level of education. It is important to note that the participants encompass a wide age range within both denominations - Lutheran women from 28 to 80 years old and Catholic women from 18 to 76 years old. Among the Lutherans, eight have higher education, and three have secondary education. As for the Catholics, all have either completed or embarked on higher education, and two have theological training. Nearly all of the women are employed, and although one Lutheran participant identifies as retired, she is still active at her work. Similarly, among the Catholics, one is retired but still involved in voluntary work, and four participants combine their studies with work commitments. In sum, it could be said that the research participants are mostly economically active, well-educated Christian women of different ages in Latvia.

1) A Catalogue of Biblical Passages

In order to carry out a more in-depth analysis of biblical interpretation, the first step is to understand which biblical texts are involved. To do this, we analysed the data to see which biblical passages were recognisable in the statements of the interviewees. We looked for quotations, allusions, mentions of the names of biblical characters or specific references to identify the relevant passages for our analysis. Notably, we also asked whether biblical texts were mentioned at all and, if yes, whether certain texts seemed to play a significant role in shaping the understanding of gender in the 21st century among Christian women in Latvia.

This inquiry was important because the responses of the Orthodox women show that the Bible can also be left out of the picture when expressing views on various issues of life. In the Lutheran and Catholic interviews, on the other hand, biblical motifs appear in every interview and in different contexts. Our first observation is that there are numerous reasons why the biblical texts may have been used, although some seem to have been particularly appealing.

In their answers, the women mention different parts of the scripture, but some are repeated. The table below provides a summary of the women's statements where we have identified references to biblical texts. We have included brief quotations from the interviews, except where the flow of conversation between interviewer and interviewee makes a brief quotation impossible. Interestingly, regardless of the denomination to which the interviewee belongs, no exact reference was ever given, only the quotation of a few book titles and never a chapter or a verse. Accordingly, in what follows, we attempt to give an overview of the biblical texts when we recognise them in the content of what was said, with an aim to examine how the women refer to these texts, what authority they give to them, how critical they are of the texts and, ultimately, what their biblical hermeneutics are.

Text	Lutheran women	Catholic women
Gen 1:27	"God created male and female" (only two sexes)	"First, man and woman, are very different. And already, I think, in the same creation, - the first book about creation, where we speak, God created a man and a woman."
Gen 1:28	"be fruitful and multiply" (against homosexuality)	
Gen 2	"man was created first, woman afterwards, but it has never been intended that one should enslave the other."	"But, the essential thing has been said: that a man was created from the earth, whereas a woman is already on the most subtle level, being created from deified matter. There's a rib – that's how it is – but the message is that she was created from deified matter. Since creation spans from the lowest, roughest matter to the most subtle, women are positioned at the top. It's a very big responsibility, being the most subtle creatures."
Gen 2:18	"a woman can be a helper" "I know that I am my husband's helper. According to God's plan. A wife is her husband's helper"	"I just heard in the lectures [...] that the word 'helper' in ancient Hebrew, as we already know, has its various meanings [...] and that the word 'helper' is used in the same sense as God is a helper to man." "A woman's task is to serve in various places and with various things, and as a helper and a teacher, she can also work with young people, with children."
Gen 12-23	Abraham and Sarah as figures	
Gen 21:4-9	"Moses going into the wilderness and meeting the snakes"	
Gen 38		Tamar as an example
Book of Ruth	Ruth as an example "relationships are always there" (in the book of Ruth)	Book of Ruth as an example
Book of Esther		Book of Esther as an example
Book of Judith		Book of Judith as an example

Table 1.

Text	Lutheran women	Catholic women
Songs of songs	As an example for relationships	
David	As a figure of polygamy	
Luke 15:25-32	"Specifically the prodigal son"	
Luke 10:32-42		"He went to Martha and Mary. .. Jesus meets women." Martha and Mary as an example Martha and Mary "who are in each of us"
John 2		"Woman, be still, now that Jesus even said to his mother, it is not her part if. Then it's an indication that she has her own place"
John 4:5-26		"He speaks to the Canaanite woman at the well, he raises the dignity."
John 8:1-18		"...it appeals to me very much where a woman is stoned. I don't know if anyone would have listened to the woman and put the stones aside. Christ was heard"
John 13:34-35		"Love one another. Love your.. your brothers"
Mt 28:1-10, Mark 16:1-8, Luke 24:1-12, John 20:11-18,		"It is about the role of women in the church, when Jesus rises, then to whom does he appear first? To a woman, yes. To a woman. And the woman takes the message to the apostles, the disciples. It is a woman who takes this message to the disciples."
1 Cor 11:3	"the man must be the head of the family" "the head of the family must be a man"	
1 Cor 11:2-16	"Concerning headdresses, for example, that headdresses should be worn" (meaning it is outdated)	
1 Cor 14:33-34	"It is already said in the Bible that a woman should be silent in the church, but I think it is not in that sense."	
Eph 5:22-25 Colossians 1:18-19	"God commanded – men: 'Husbands, love your wives.' It's hard for men to love like that. He does not have as much of this soulful love as a woman. That is why God says, 'Husbands, love your wives.' And what does he say to the wives? 'Listen! Obey your husbands!'"	"That husbands must obey their wives, and wives must obey their husbands." "Husbands, love your wives and wives, obey your husbands."
1 Tim 2:11-13	"there is about the teaching" (prohibited to women) "that women are not allowed to study"	

Table 1. (continued)

Text	Lutheran women	Catholic women
1 John 4:8	"God is love" (might also be a general statement)	
Paul's letters	"When you read Paul's letters, there is always something for husbands to do, something for wives."	
Women at the cross		"Women were also at the cross and there was complete equality."
Maria		Maria as an example of trust as a woman and as a Mother (in 5 interviews)
The New Testament, the Old Testament		"the New Testament appeals to me more than the Old Testament"

Table 1. (continued)

From this catalogue of scriptural references, we can note a slight predominance of the biblical texts that express the subordination of women to men, especially among the Lutheran women interviewed. Also, as a general observation, Catholic women seem to cite more positive biblical examples as role models for women. When examining the meaning of the biblical texts, it becomes clear that both groups draw on the biblical story of creation primarily in order to discern the divine intention for the order of the world. This leads to interpretations of the relationship between the two sexes that suggest either equality or subordination. Furthermore, both groups also referenced the household regulations found in Ephesians 5:22-25 and Colossians 1:18-19, which argue that women should submit to their husbands. However, despite this common reference, the two groups show differences in their respective interpretations of these passages. Catholic representatives tend to emphasise the Gospels, highlighting the positive role of women, including the importance of their role as witnesses to the resurrection. Lutherans, on the other hand, tend to focus on Paul's letters, citing what they see as specific instructions regarding the role of women in congregational settings. This intersectional variety can tell us something about how women navigate these issues differently depending on their institutional affiliation and position in the church hierarchy, but it also demonstrates that the Bible plays a different role as an authoritative text in the two churches.

Besides these references, the interview data also contains general expressions, such as the Bible, the sacred scriptures, the New and Old Testament, etc. It seems that these terms are mostly used to convey the idea that the Bible has a clear message. In terms of gender roles, the Bible is widely seen as defending hierarchical relationships between the sexes, but it also contains evidence of liberating impulses or is perceived as ambiguous.

2) Grassroots Hermeneutics: Interpretation of Biblical Texts

a. Reading the Bible

Although reading habits were not one of the questions the researchers asked the interviewees, several women from both denominations talked about their Bible reading, which gives an insight into what the Bible means to them. For Lutheran informants, regardless of age, the Bible seems to play an important role in their daily lives. The Bible appears to be an important artefact that fulfils a variety of functions in their lives from the perspective of lived religion. For example, reading the Bible is part of the daily habits of Agnese (Lutheran, 28). It is a source of

meditation for Ilva (Lutheran, 61). For her, the texts are used as a source for the interpretation of life situations: “I have periods I kind of live with some Scripture passages.” ... “I live these passages of the Scriptures inside myself and look at them from different points of view.” Some of the married informants explained how they read the Bible in their family during family prayer, and some also mentioned explicitly that their husbands are responsible for reading.

The Catholic women also shared some information about their Bible-reading habits. Marta (Catholic, 50) stressed the importance of using biblical texts in her work. Another confessed that she does not read the Bible regularly, but when she feels compelled, she looks for support in the texts in Psalms or the New Testament (Vanda, Catholic, 57). The youngest participant stated that she does not read it often (Arta, Catholic, 18).

As evidenced by the collection of biblical references in the interviews, both Lutheran and Catholic women, in general, demonstrated that biblical language and ideas influence their considerations. However, the interviews do not provide sufficient information to determine the extent to which this knowledge comes directly from reading the Bible or from education and Christian socialisation, as the interviewees are all active members of the church. Overall, we can conclude that biblical texts, stories and figures play an important role in the piety of the project participants, especially the Lutherans. Although not all of them claimed to read the Bible on a regular basis, the text is regarded as something to live according to, and it serves as a spiritual resource for them.

b. Interpreting the Bible

The Bible seems to be seen as an authority in the responses of the Latvian Christian interlocutors, as is evident in several interviews. However, the individual perception of the biblical text is much more differentiated. Both the Bible as such and biblical verses, concepts or characters are used in their argumentation, but there is also some questioning of its authority.

The Bible as a Book of Wisdom and Love

For the Lutheran women, in particular, the Bible is imagined as containing all the teachings that could ever be necessary. Agnese (Lutheran, 28) considers the Bible to be a source of knowledge and a book that has fascinated her since childhood. For Lidija (Lutheran, 49), the Bible, especially the stories in the Old Testament, is a “consolation.” For her, because the biblical stories represent people like Abraham and Sarah as being far from perfect, these stories are like real life, which is why she considers them to be true.

While high value is unanimously given to the Bible, at the same time, many interviewees separated this evaluation from a more meticulous study, which, according to Ilva (Lutheran, 61), can be found in some other denominations: “There they really go deep and prepare the biblical text very, very deeply. I don’t need that as a person, I need love.” The contrast here between deep Bible reading and love is interesting, as it suggests that, for her, love is understood as the primary meaning of the biblical text, a meaning which seems to be easier to grasp than the intricate details of the text. The notion that love is the most important message of the Bible came up in several interviews, including with women from other churches (e.g., Betija, Catholic, 34, Ina, Catholic, 50, also Orthodox, Gertrude, 70-80). Factors such as age or denomination intersect with approaches to the Bible, so it is difficult to draw clear lines.

The Bible as an Authority

A study of hermeneutics in Latvia has found that: “In the Christian society of Latvia, including the clergy, signs of fundamentalism are observed - a strong conviction of the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible, concerns that the authority of the Bible is being lost due to the changes of the times, and fears of imposed moral degradation” (Balode and Rozners 2020, 35). We have

also observed that, among Lutherans, no distinction was made between 'the truth' and what is true in the Bible or what the person considers to be true. As might be expected in this context, the data from the interviews shows that perceived biblical authority is indeed high. This holds across the intersectional diversity of the informants, but there are exceptions where there is some distancing from the text. Arnita (Lutheran, 59) is aware of the time gap between the Bible and the present, so she acknowledges that the biblical understanding of male and female roles may have lost its relevance. More specifically, some women explained that the command to be silent should be interpreted differently. One explained, "God has not decreed that man is superior. And if a woman feels to have a special calling, why shouldn't she be a pastor?" (Judite, Lutheran, 68).

Among the Catholic women, the younger participants tend to be more critical of the authority of the Bible and its interpretation. As Dina (Catholic, 22) states, "Whatever the Holy Scriptures say, to reconcile and create a meaningful and non-contradictory teaching, interpretation is required, which would already be a human, not a divine hand." She calls for a critical attitude towards biblical statements: "It seems to me that one text passage alone should not be a sufficient reason to consider it a true and complete teaching." Another Catholic informant, while incorporating the Bible in her spiritual practices, recalls that she has been made aware of the fact that the texts have been edited over the centuries. This knowledge seems to have affected her perspective, as she states, "Therefore, I cannot definitively say that there is absolute truth in it. For instance, I have spoken with people who say, well, it is full of violence - speaking specifically about the Old Testament - and then it is very, very difficult for me to refute that" (Vanda, Catholic, 57). Though these critical voices are rather few, they reveal that the understanding of biblical authority, even within the conservative churches, is by no means uniform. A distinct difference in attitude was observed among women of various ages attending both churches. It is noteworthy that all these women had higher education.

The Right Method of Interpretation

Statements about hermeneutical methods, which the women evaluated, also emerged in the interviews. On this theme, Marta (Catholic, 50) understands words as holding a given power: "God was so faithful and complete that He gave such immense power to humans - the power of words, the ability to express them." In the quest for the "right" method of biblical interpretation, it seems that some women understand themselves to be guardians of the biblical text, as in guarding against its improper usage. This was most evident in the condemnation of "liberalism" in the interviews. One of the informants characterised liberalism as "a negative tendency to try to translate the Scriptures, the word of God in some way... To start stretching it a lot, forwards, backwards" (Solveiga, Lutheran, 57).

Due to the interview's focus on gender equality, the interviewees spent ample time discussing men and women and their respective roles, using biblical verses or the Bible in general in their argumentation. In some interviews, there are objections to the tendency to argue using a single Bible verse, for instance, against women's ordination. One informant describes how such argumentation can be challenged by other verses as if it were some kind of game. She refers specifically to the context of the abolishment of female ordination in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Latvia. Since this happened in 1993, both public and not-so-public discussions have been taking place to varying degrees of intensity. It was especially intense at the beginning, right after the ordination of women was stopped, and again in 2016, when this issue was prepared for the synod vote. One of the arguments that came up often was that the church, by prohibiting the ordination of women, was obeying the Bible. Ilva (Lutheran, 61) used the metaphor of playing cards to make her point:

One shouldn't do that. Other verses can also be found. What, then, will we toss verses like cards? You have one card, I have other card. People must be respected. If they [women] are

ordained to God in these positions, I don't think one should... I wasn't there at the time when it was announced. There was applause that the Lutheran Church in Latvia would not accept female pastors and homosexuality. It's ignoble to make comparisons like this.

So far, we have presented a diverse range of perspectives on the authority of the Bible and its interpretations. The answers of the interviewed Christian Latvian women illustrate the significant variety in how these women deal with questions of how to interpret the Bible and how much authority to give to these interpretations. This variety emerges out of the diversity of individual experiences and beliefs.

c. Biblical Interpretation of Gender Roles in Church and Family: Difference and Subordination

This section presents biblical interpretation strategies and the role of biblical texts in shaping the understanding of gender roles among the interviewees. The objective of the interviews was to explore Latvian Christian women's perspectives on gender and their personal experiences of gender dynamics. Nevertheless, only one of the interviewed women (Kaija, Catholic, 50) emphasised that gender plays a big role in religious life. Thus, in general, it seems that for these Latvian Catholic and Lutheran women, gender does not fit into the category of religious issues. In other words, for them, gender is considered an unimportant, even unnecessary, issue when it comes to piety.

Women and Men Are Different

The impression one gets from the interviews is that the basic message of the Bible about gender roles is a separation of responsibilities: there are things for which men are more responsible and things for which women are more responsible. On this point, age and background do not play significant roles. The women consistently make vague allusions to biblical texts to legitimise their opinions. For instance, humans should not oppose the roles dedicated to each gender because it is part of God's overall creation plan. Lelde (Lutheran, 56) highlights the words from the story of creation: man was created first and woman after. At the same time, she emphasises that this does not mean one sex can enslave the other. However, according to her, in the biblical texts, women have a more prophetic role, whereas men are entrusted with leadership roles, "shepherds." Other women from both denominations made similar statements. Kaija (Catholic, 50) said, "Women's faith is, indeed, much more emotional. She might receive various revelations and visions when communicating with God, which, in my view, always needs careful examination. But this is related to a woman's sensitivity. Well, women are designed with such an emotional apparatus for raising and nurturing children. And, in my opinion, men should protect that; it would be right." Here, the argument is not biblical, yet it is a notably widespread belief among the interviewed women. Furthermore, we should add that this conviction that women are more emotional than men appears in many interviews, not just with Christians but also with Muslim individuals. This argument is made to explain why men must take the leading positions. Thus, when interpreting gender roles, women can mix biblical and non-biblical arguments.

Leadership Roles: Men Should Be in Charge

More than half of the women interviewed from both denominations (15 out of 23) stressed that men should generally be in charge. When women seek leadership, they displace men from their God-given position, an argument shared by two Lutheran women (Lidija, 49; Lelde, 56). Similar statements were made by women of different ages, educational backgrounds and marital statuses. Interestingly, well-educated women who occupy leadership positions also made this point. Therefore, there is a certain discrepancy between what these women consider to be "right" and what they actually implement in their lives. In fact, they navigate between

religious and social identities. It is important to highlight that the distinction between the family, the church and society is not always clear-cut. It seems some would argue for male superiority in all these domains. Nevertheless, some Catholic women hold the view that equality should prevail in everyday life, but they do not see any problem with the priesthood being male-only (Aira, 34; Vanda, 57).² However, not all women shared such views, and there was a much stronger emphasis on gender equality in the statements made by the younger Catholic participants. One of them even identifies herself as a feminist (Rasa, 22).

Looking at the biblical arguments women use in this context, we have found recognisable patterns and arguments from the Pauline letters, where specific hierarchies between God, Christ, men and women are outlined. Positions and power in the divine realm are meant to be copied in the familial realm, which, for some, is an appreciated organisation: "I also rejoice in the order that Christ is the head of the husband and the husband is the head of the wife" (Sabine, Lutheran, 52). The biblical message was also interpreted as "listen to your husbands" among some of the Catholic women (e.g., Aira, 34). The majority of the participants are married, so they speak from the perspective of their own experience, yet the youngest, non-married Lutheran participant (Agnese, 28) seems to be in accord: "In this regard, I also find it somewhat easy to accept the idea that the man should be the head of the family. But it's easy for me to talk because I'm not married. At least on a conceptual level, I find it easy to accept it."

Speaking on leadership in the church, "the Bible" was sometimes used as an argument in its own right. For example, according to Sabine (Lutheran, 52), the Bible teaches that "in the church there is still a man in front." Another woman, speaking about biblical texts, says, "I have not read anywhere that a woman would run ahead and be a decision-maker or something. Woman, stay calm, now that Jesus even said to his mother, it is not her part" (Antra, Catholic, 76). In these examples, the biblical text as a whole is interpreted to imply that women must take a submissive role.

Additionally, God's plan for creation is evoked when differentiating the gender roles. One Lutheran woman stated, "I know that I am my husband's helper. According to God's plan. A wife is her husband's helper. Together, we form a part of completeness" (Lelde, Lutheran, 56). Another informant, a Catholic (Maija, 63), stated that, of course, laypeople of both genders can play important roles in the Church, but "God's given order" corresponds with the example of Jesus: "he appointed male apostles as his disciples. And women were also there, but he did not appoint them as apostles."

Regarding the interpretation of the word "helper" in Gen 2:18, it is indeed interesting that the Catholic interlocutors expressed a relatively more emancipatory view: this word is the one that the Hebrew Bible uses in relation to God. This interpretation also appears in the apostolic letter by Pope John Paul *Mulieris dignitatem* (1988) and the papal encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), and it is worth noting that the interviewee who specifically mentioned this interpretation (Maija, Catholic, 63) has undergone theological education.

Non-biblical Arguments

There are also answers which suggest that the reasoning is not based on the Bible, for example, on the issue of women's ordination. We mentioned the biblical reference to a woman's role as a "helper," but such an interpretation may also be seen as coming from outside the Bible. When explicitly asked whether the division of roles was biblical or universal, one of the women states: "I think it is humane, because, well, I say, a woman can be a helper. She can be,

² In this context, the study of Shoshana Feher is interesting, as she investigated gender relations among Orthodox Jews and Evangelical Christians and found that the Orthodox women are more accepting of inequality in religious settings than in workplace (Feher, 1998, 119-120).

well, serve in the church, there is already so much service, there is something for women to develop" (Guna, Lutheran, 57).

Regarding women in the church offices, our findings indicate that the majority of Lutheran women were against female ordination, with only three expressing support for it. One participant, Lidija (Lutheran, 49), even stated that she would not attend a congregation where a woman serves as the pastor. Ģirts Rozners, a co-researcher in the ReliGen project who also worked on the interviews with Latvian Lutheran women, observes that they often judge gender roles based on their specific personal experiences. For instance, when it comes to the issue of female ordination, the interviewees tend to be critical of other women's desire to become pastors only if they themselves have never aspired to occupy a leadership position or have not experienced the challenges of the existing power structure (Rozners 2022).

Additionally, Church authorities seem to play a central role in non-biblical arguments. Our findings show women referring to the leadership of the church as a way of strengthening the authority of their arguments. This loyalty to church leaders comes from an understanding that they are authoritative figures, which itself is a guarantee for truth and thus does not require any additional arguments or legitimations (like biblical ones). For example, some of the Lutheran women, in discussions around female ordination, refer to the church leadership: "I support the archbishop" (Guna, 57); "I respect the decision of my archbishop" (Solveiga, 57).

The Bible Contains a Moral Code to Be Followed: Sexual Relations and Biblical Arguments

In most of the women's answers, they argue that the Bible prescribes a strict moral code in sexual relations. Note that the interviewees were all heterosexual, or at least none of the data suggests otherwise. This may inform their understanding of promiscuity and homosexuality.

According to one informant, there is promiscuity in the world because people do not live according to the teachings of the Bible (Guna, Lutheran, 57), which does not support "free" relationships (Arnita, Lutheran, 59). For some women, the Bible is clearly against homosexuality: "God said be fruitful and multiply" (Guna, Lutheran, 57); the creation story is against homosexuality because God created man and woman and not any other sexes (Solveiga, Lutheran, 57). Only one of the women (Solvita, Lutheran, 42) acknowledged that the Bible, which is understood as being about relationships, also includes polygamy.

In this regard, it is hermeneutically interesting that the prevailing attitude among women in both denominations is that the Bible has a clear, singular message that encompasses the necessary moral code for a person's life, which extends beyond sexuality. Many of the interlocutors often seem to assume the accuracy of their knowledge of what the Bible "says" without engaging in further discussions. References are vague and peripheral rather than to specific biblical texts or concepts, which suggests that they are operating with an "imagined" version of the Bible that is used as proof or validation for their own beliefs.

Positive Female Role Models

Although the prevailing backdrop among the interviewed women emphasises hierarchical gender relations, the picture would not be complete without paying attention to the emancipatory impulses that some women perceive in the texts of the Bible. Positive female role models appear in the interviews of several Catholics (see Table 1). Some of the responses demonstrate ample knowledge of various female figures in biblical texts. There even seems to be an awareness that there are other females whose names do not appear in the texts. One informant explains, "Ruth, Esther, Judith - not just one book. ... Tamar and... those are female characters who appear as... But interestingly, there are many women whose names don't appear at all, and we can't know at all. Martha, Mary, and, of course, the mother of Jesus. I

think she is quite important... [...] I believe it's a very important indication that without that woman - yes, without a woman, well, we can't really make anything happen either. It goes back to the point that a... well, a team is needed" (Tina, Catholic, 35). Kaija (Catholic, 50) stresses the stories of the Old Testament: "Well, there are women's stories in the Old Testament, yes, indeed. Stories of brave women where a woman's decision changes something." And Maija (Catholic, 63) adds in the New Testament: "... then we move on to the New Testament, and indeed, Jesus, yes, there have been various matriarchies and patriarchies, but, look, Jesus is the one who elevates women's dignity to the appropriate level. He talks to the Canaanite woman at the well, he raises this dignity." The interviewed Catholic women also tend to emphasise the role of Mary, for example, with the statement that Christ as a man and Mary as a woman form a balance (Vanda, Catholic, 57). In other statements, Mary appears as the mother of Jesus who carried him, and the time Jesus spent time in Mary's womb is then likened to all human experiences (Marta, Catholic, 50).

It can be assumed that women's perspectives on gender roles in the Bible have been influenced by the ongoing debates around female ordination, particularly for the Lutheran informants. However, explanations can also be offered from an intersectional perspective. Certain emancipatory readings of biblical texts may be attributed to a higher level of education and knowledge among these women. Their socio-economic background also likely exerts some influence. Therefore, the positive evaluation of female biblical characters, which was particularly evident in the interviews with Catholic women, may be related to the independence some of them have gained due to their level of education and work experiences.

Exploring Gender Equality in the Bible

When discussing gender equality and the Bible, Catholic women show a more relaxed attitude towards the texts. They either perceive gender equality within the texts or are capable of distancing themselves from them in a relaxed manner if they do not find gender equality in them. Especially among young Catholic women, we find that there is no hesitation to talk about gender equality. Rasa (Catholic, 22) considers the scripture-based gender differences to be based on physiology, for example, the role of women in giving birth, but clarifies that this remains only at the physiological level without further ideology. Dina (Catholic, 22) states, "Overall, I feel that on a theoretical and abstract level, the Holy Scriptures support gender equality. However, in practical terms, when it comes to how things should be done, certain passages and teachings appear to be restrictive towards women." Other women of various ages compare the Bible with contemporary practices. In the past, there was inequality, but now "everyone understands that men and women are equal" (Anna, Catholic, 18). It is interesting that when Betija (Catholic, 34) recalls the teaching of mutual responsibility, "That husbands should listen to their wives, and wives should listen to their husbands," she further explains, "Well, love is mutual."

On gender equality amongst the apostles, some Catholic women state that they are male because they are meant to be close to Jesus. There is also an explanation that this was the cultural context of the time. Further, the fact that all of the Gospels say that women were present as important followers does not necessarily mean there is gender equality in all areas. In the words of one of the informants:

There were women at the cross. Yes, it was a really painful moment. Women were also at the cross and there it was complete equality. But in the service itself, in managing things, men - well, that's cultural and historical. Well, I think so, those are my thoughts (Marta, Catholic, 50).

DISCUSSION

We have found several tendencies and patterns in the material, some conventional and expected, others more surprising. Within the framework of biblical reception, these data add to other studies of how lay people read the Bible, use it to argue about their values and attitudes and apply it in their everyday lives. From a “lived religion” perspective, these women produce a biblical interpretation that can be added to the overall dogma of ecclesiastical traditions. Taking into account the intersectional variety among the women included in this study, such as age, education, church tradition and socio-economic background, we would like to highlight some of the key findings:

1. Among the Lutherans, biblical quotations and allusions that limit women prevail, whereas Catholic women tend to cite examples as models of strong female characters. We explain this phenomenon as related to the context of the ongoing discourse on women’s ordination in the Latvian Lutheran Church, where the question of whether a woman can or should be a pastor is emphasised.

2. The authority given to the Bible is high, especially among Lutheran women. At the same time, reference to exact biblical quotations is relatively low. The Bible is seen as a source of meditation, a source of spiritual strengthening and an everyday text to live by.

3. Women reportedly already “know” what the Bible says; that is, the Bible confirms what is understood as universal truths. The translation of popular beliefs into biblical messages can be seen, for example, in the idea that the Bible says, “The husband is the head of the family.” Here, the biblical message about gender roles is combined with a popular saying, an old cultural statement that likely has origins in the biblical texts but has become folklore used to emphasise the dominance of men.

4. There is some distancing from the biblical texts perceived as limiting - they belong to antiquity, express outdated views or have even been reworked. This attitude is represented by women of various ages and from both denominations.

5. There is also a positive reinterpretation of biblical texts and a focus on female role models. This tendency is found mostly among Catholic women.

6. In the overall material, it is possible to identify conceptual creativity in the intersectional grassroots biblical reception: metaphors and interpretations at times appear original, innovative and not entirely loyal to other authoritative understandings.

7. The intersectional approach has enabled us not only to describe women’s interpretations of the Bible in a nuanced way but also to recognise the diversity among the interviewed women. It allows us to see the differences between Lutheran and Catholic women and that younger Catholic women interpret more freely and with less adherence to traditional views. The point has not been to group these women according to their different beliefs but rather to represent the diversity of biblical interpretation among them.

CONCLUSION

We have found that when different Christian women in Latvia are asked to talk about gender equality and religion, the Bible plays an important role in their rhetoric. Our aim was not to find and analyse the differences between liberal and traditional attitudes, nor was it to portray differences between Lutherans and Catholics. Instead, we were curious about how the various informants employed the Bible in conversations about gender equality and religion.

The unique situation with the reversal of women's ordination in one of Latvia's main churches makes these women's reasoning about gender, the Bible and the church of specific interest.

Although not quoting specific books, chapters or verses, the interviewed women still seem to know what the Bible says, or at least what it says to them. They employ it to support their own views, they trust the Bible as telling the truth, they distinguish between different ways of approaching the Bible, they use biblical characters as role models, and they find their own ways of navigating what they think the Bible says. This is true for women of different ages, backgrounds and denominations.

The Bible has authority, but so do the women themselves: they are finding meaning in the biblical narratives according to their own authority. What is striking is that the Bible appears to be quite flexible as a source of authority. It is something to be followed closely and to be used for legitimating certain ways of living, but, at the same time, it is also to be challenged, criticised or negotiated. This is typical of biblical reception at the grassroots: as a living text, the Bible becomes a vital conversation partner in the process of looking for meaning and identifying hermeneutics. Nevertheless, the Bible is merely a book; it has no voice of its own. Thus, the women themselves articulate what the Bible says and means, often in creative and independent ways. In this respect, these interviews all demonstrate a high level of biblical literacy and religious agency.

Andrew Village's discoveries about how the congregation as an interpretive community influences - or, on the contrary, does not influence - individual interpretations are salient here. In general, it should be recognised that there is a certain influence; in fact, in belonging to a specific community, to some extent, one agrees to a common interpretation. Those whose ideas differ can have a weaker connection to the community, although, importantly, different interpretations exist within every community. Thus, Village (2007, 142) concludes, "This model of congregational life has no place for the monolithic interpretative community. Such a thing is an idealized myth..." The women we interviewed belong to various congregations in Latvia, and to a certain extent, these churches are "interpretive communities" in the sense of Stanley Fish. That is not to say that the whole community necessarily agrees on all aspects of meaning-making, but it offers these women an equal voice capable of valid interpretations of biblical texts.

Our study merely scratches the surface of a more detailed interpretation and identification of the diversity within a denominational or interdenominational framework. The next step might entail a much broader approach, focusing on Bible reading habits and interpretation. This expanded research should involve a qualitative and quantitative study that considers various social indicators such as gender, education, social status, denominational affiliation, church attendance and involvement in the congregation. An intriguing aspect of this next step would be to compare, for instance, how Lutheran women and men interpret the Bible, asking whether they have different reading habits or emphases on specific interpretations. This kind of study would shed light on how and in what ways the Bible is *lived* in Christian denominations. It would also be interesting to compare the attitudes of representatives from different religions towards scriptures and gender. We have already noticed, for instance, that the belief that women are more emotional and, therefore, less suitable for leadership roles transcended the boundaries of one religion. It would be intriguing to compare attitudes towards gender and how these beliefs correlate with scriptural interpretation or what is considered scriptural teachings.

One of our goals, as well as a potential goal for future studies, is to strengthen the dialogue between academic and congregational theology. Undoubtedly, this dialogue must begin with mutual listening, which can be initiated through empirical studies of this sort. Of course, one could also inquire about whether and how much academia influences the reading and

interpretation of the Bible within congregations. In his study, Andrew Village raises this key question: to what extent do the topics discussed by the academy reach the so-called “ordinary reader?” Indeed, it is an interesting concern. The subtleties of academic discourse may have little influence on the parish reader, but the academy may significantly influence the pastors or other church leaders, and accordingly, sometimes the topics of academic discussions “trickle down” to the members of the congregation (2007, 25). Admittedly, in the Latvian context, there is not a strong academic tradition related to congregational theology, and we can only hope that theological education in Latvia continues and develops. However, in the material studied here, it is clear that despite the fact that most of the women interviewed lack formal theological training, they still demonstrate theological and biblical literacy. Therefore, we argue that the ways in which these women engage in argumentation, conceptualisation and reasoning represent a form of doing theology, whether or not this form is aligned with the theology of the academy.

Denominational adherence, age, education and professional status seem to be key factors influencing how the Bible operates in conversations about gender equality. Some informants expressed a rather naïve understanding of what the Bible says, treating it as a blueprint to be imitated in an ideal world. Power hierarchies and ancient gender perceptions are not challenged or problematised, though education plays a role in determining their willingness to let the two temporal horizons, biblical and contemporary time, completely overlap or conflate.

In this article, we have spotlighted women’s opinions on gender equality, representing women as relevant and interesting Bible interpreters. They are doing biblical reception at the grassroots. Our intersectional perspective has revealed that women’s engagement with the Bible can, sometimes, be independent, original and creative and, other times, loyal and dependent on church authority. Accordingly, the role of the Bible as the main authoritative text seems to be a productive lens for uncovering more about how an intersectional group of women understand gender equality and religion.

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