



TEMENOS

NORDIC JOURNAL OF COMPARATIVE RELIGION

Temenos Vol. 56 No. 2 (2020), 227–49

DOI: 10.33356/temenos.79326

Negotiating Religion: Cultural Representations of Conservative Protestant Women and Girls in Northern and Western Europe¹

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Abstract

This article analyses the production of gendered subjectivities in contemporary cultural representations of women and girls belonging to conservative protestant communities in Northern and Western Europe. We take the recent work of the Finnish and Dutch female novelists Pauliina Rauhala and Franca Treur as our case study. We explore how their novels represent the negotiations of women and girls from conservative protestant faiths and traditions. Approaching the novels as narratives of sense-making, we focus on notions of creativity and imagination, and gendered embodied experiences. Our analysis thus sheds light on contemporary understandings of women in conservative religions in contemporary Northern and Western Europe.

Keywords: *representation; literary fiction; sense-making; women; conservative religion; Europe*

1 We are grateful to a number of institutions and foundations that have financially supported us in writing this article, including the Argumenta project 'Uskontolukutaito moniarvoisessa yhteiskunnassa'; the Catherina Halkes Foundation; the Erasmus+ Mobility programme; the Eemil Aaltonen Foundation ('Lestadiolaisuuden yhteiskunnalliset verkostot'); the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Lapland; and the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research-funded project 'Beyond 'Religion versus Emancipation': Gender and Sexuality in Women's Conversions to Judaism, Christianity and Islam in Contemporary Western Europe'. We would also like to thank Anne-Marie Korte, Aini Linjakumpu, Lieke Schrijvers, Lucy Spoliar, and Mariecke van den Berg, as well as the anonymous peer reviewers, for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

This article explores contemporary constructions of gendered subjectivities in cultural representations of women and girls belonging to conservative protestant communities in Northern and Western Europe. The protestant traditions referred to are Conservative Laestadianism in Finland and orthodox reformed Protestantism in the Netherlands. Both these communities make up about one to two per cent of the total population of their respective countries, forming relatively small but influential religious minority groups (Talonen 2016; Derks et al. 2014). Our case study is the recent work of Finnish and Dutch female bestselling and widely read novelists Pauliina Rauhala and Franca Treur. Inspired by interdisciplinary conversations in the study of religion, cultural studies, anthropology, and gender studies, we examine how their novels reflect on the lived process of negotiating religion. This article thus makes a significant contribution to the consideration of how conservative protestants are represented in contemporary popular culture and literature.

We approach popular culture as a formative space within which conceptions and understandings of religion are generated (Stone 2013, 403). We thus consider cultural productions not as merely conveying informative portrayals or constructing imaginaries, but simultaneously as potential sites of religious experience and meaning-making (Morgan 2008, 6–7). The novels that are central in this article are bestselling stories emerging from and shaping Finnish and Dutch popular culture. Through popular stories both authors and readers potentially make sense of their experiences and interpret the social world. As media and cultural theorist Michael Pickering puts it, '[i]n everyday life and popular culture, we are continually engaged in narratives of one kind or another. They fill our days and form our lives' (Pickering 2009, 6). This claim about the cruciality of stories to human life and culture (Pinker 2007, 162) assumes no causal relationship between cultural productions and people's everyday subjective understandings and experiences. It only posits a relationship between them: movies, memoirs, and novels influence how we perceive and experience the world, and vice versa. They have the potential to be memory-shaping media (Erll 2008, 395–7) or to function as mediums through which religious identities are represented, and the 'sacred' becomes manifest in the world (Meyer 2011). Moreover, cultural productions can be a platform for conveying narratives that align with dominant representations of people, objects, and events; but they may equally provide opportunities for telling 'other' stories by starting from marginalized voices, bodies, and experiences (van den Brandt 2019a).

Our main question is: how do the writings of Rauhala and Treur represent women and girls negotiating protestant faith and tradition? The notion of representation used here refers to the production and construction of meaning (Hall 1997; Wallenius-Korkalo 2013), while the term negotiation refers to dealing with mechanisms of power and difference. We thus consider these literary texts as representations that are formative cultural practices: they summon new ways of seeing and understanding (Felski 2008, 9–10) women and girls negotiating their gendered subject positions. In what follows we further situate this article in current interdisciplinary discussions of popular culture, lived religion, and agency. Second, we briefly introduce the religious communities to which the novels relate and the novels themselves. For our analysis we introduce the concept of sense-making, which helps us to focus on various aspects involved in representing female subjectivities and their lived religious practices embedded in conservative protestant communities. Third, our analysis explores how female subjectivity in conservative protestant communities is understood. Finally, we address the issue of representation in relation to the place of conservative religious communities in contemporary Northern and Western European societies.

Representations of women's lived religion

In the introduction we situated this article partly in the broad field of cultural studies. While cultural studies has developed in fruitful connection with literary theory (Bertens 2014), it has largely developed separately from and outside religious studies. However, the anthropologist Malory Nye (2004) has argued that it is relevant and rewarding to bring cultural studies perspectives into a conversation with religious studies and anthropology. We approach the novels by posing questions typically asked by cultural studies scholars, namely: how are the authors and their novels doing what they are doing within the context of their work, but also with reference to the particular traditions and societies in which they are located? The literary works we analyse somewhat blur the boundaries between fiction and autobiography/memoir. While both Rauhala and Treur emphasize that their novels are fiction, both construct their stories on the basis of their own lived experiences within the traditions and communities they describe. However, a simple 'inside perspective' cannot be assumed here. Both authors have distanced themselves from the communities in which they grew up, which means that their narratives are ways of looking back, reflecting, memorizing, and making sense of self, others, and society.

Methodologically, we assess these novels as both representations and fictive narrations of lived experience. Scholars of religion, media, and culture helpfully remind us that the two are often interrelated. Cultural productions communicate religion-as-lived or religion-as-it-has-been-lived: while creating fictive worlds, they draw on lived realities (Morgan 2008). Religious studies scholar and anthropologist Birgit Meyer argues that studying the forms in which religious life is culturally mediated is crucial to an understanding of how religious realities are constructed and maintained (Meyer 2015a, 1), or we would add, reflected on. Representations in popular culture or literary works may influence the embodied, affectual, aesthetic, and ethical basis of the religious life being portrayed (Forbes 2005, 10–6; Lynch, Mitchell, and Strhan 2012, 3). In the case of Rauhala and Treur and the reception of their work, it could be argued that representations of religion may equally function as sources for the embodied, affectual, aesthetic, and ethical basis of *secular* perspectives and lives when read by a diverse audience, including secular and religious readers of various backgrounds. We will return to this issue at the end of the article.

Our analysis discusses how the novels convey/construct women's and girls' lived experiences. We use the sociological notion of 'lived religion', the critical concept of agency, and religious studies scholars' understandings of negotiating religion to examine how the novels' female characters are embedded in their conservative protestant communities on a daily basis. Conceptualized by sociologist Meredith McGuire (2008), 'lived religion' shifts attention from religious institutions to everyday experiences that are embodied, hybrid, ambiguous, and importantly, gendered (160–161) and embedded in power relations. From the angle of the anthropology of Islam, Saba Mahmood (2005) has pushed us to broaden our appreciation of the lives of women belonging to conservative religious traditions. She urges us to consider agency in terms of the capacity to act, taking issues of morality, embodiment, and desire seriously. Mahmood helps us to ask what Rauhala and Treur convey as the discursive context in which their female characters come into being, and what these characters then consider viable, desirable, and legitimate thoughts and actions. We pose such questions about the representation of female characters *aspiring to* a pious life, as well as *struggling with* the religious traditions they are thought to value. Such an assessment of the novels will reveal what the authors consider to be conservative protestant gendered forms of agency and life.

Both novels focus on how women and girls live and sometimes struggle with protestant faith and community. Exploring women's and girls' strate-

gies of negotiating their faith and communities highlights how the novels present mechanisms of power and difference. These can be studied by focusing on moments of both lived piety and struggle, doubt, incoherence, and conflict. Research by religious studies scholars on negotiating religion demonstrates that experiences of uncertainty, doubt, and dissonance can be productive of subject-formation in diverging ways: a self-perceived 'failure' in religious life and straying from the path may invigorate lived religion (Kloos and Beekers 2017), or it may lead subjects to distance themselves or disaffiliate from their religious life and community, some with and some without reaffiliation (Streib 2014). The novels present women's and girls' aspiration for an individual pious life and striving for collective belonging. Yet they also present moments of dissonance between conflictual desires and conflict with the community. Piety, belonging, and conflict are all narrated as profoundly embodied experiences. Our analysis therefore explores the embodied dimension of the representation of religion-as-lived-and-negotiated by women and girls. Anthropologist Peter van der Veer identifies a recent turn to the study of embodiment, materiality, and power. Van der Veer observes that protestant traditions have often been considered important historical sites of thinking about the reflexive subject, unmediated access to the divine, and agency (2008, 813). We suggest it is relevant to study cultural representations of women's negotiations with protestant faith and traditions, because it sheds light on the gendered experiences of women's agentic 'lived religion', as well as on broader issues of representation.

The above discussion of theories of popular culture, lived religion, and agency helps us in what follows to draw attention to the novels' representation of female characters belonging to conservative protestant communities in Finland and the Netherlands. Our analysis explores how struggle and conflict emerge through the topics of creativity and imagination, and the gendered body. However, we first briefly introduce the protestant traditions and communities to which the novels relate.

Conservative Protestantism in Finland and the Netherlands

The protestant traditions referred to by the novels are Conservative Laestadianism in Finland and orthodox reformed Protestantism in the Netherlands. Conservative Laestadianism is the largest branch of Laestadianism, a protestant revival movement founded on the spiritual work of the Swedish-Sámi scientist and priest Lars Levi Laestadius (1800–1861). The movement is most prominent in Finland, where Laestadians constitute about two per cent of

the country's population, and Conservative Laestadians have around 90,000 members (Talonen 2016, 134). Despite its relatively small size, Conservative Laestadianism is an influential movement to which many entrepreneurs, business owners, and politicians belong (Linjakumpu et al. 2019). Conservative Laestadians are officially part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland, but they also have their own religious organizations, called *rauh-anyhdistys* (peace associations).² Conservative Laestadianism maintains an exclusive view of a 'church within a church', considering their organization to be Christianity in its purest form, holding that outside their group salvation is impossible. Conservative Laestadians diverge from mainstream Finnish society in that they live by strict theological and moral codes. For example, Conservative Laestadians do not approve of premarital sex, birth control, alcohol use, or television, and they are expected to participate actively in their congregation and emphasize strong personal religious conviction (Salomäki 2010). Gender hierarchy is woven deeply into Conservative Laestadianism. The Office of Preaching is reserved for men, as are all the leading positions in the movement's organization. The role of women is to be helpmeets of their husbands and mothers for their children. Thus, Conservative Laestadian patriarchal doctrines strongly regulate the lives of girls and women, but in different ways those of boys and men as well (Hintsala 2016; Rantala 2018). While Laestadianism is considered part of the Finnish national imaginary, and Laestadians are perceived as embodying many national characteristics and virtues such as solemnity, modesty, and being hardworking, their attitudes to the role and positions of women in church and society, and to sexual minorities, are largely considered outdated – and they can therefore be considered a cultural-religious minority in Finland (Anttonen 2018).

Orthodox reformed Protestantism is an umbrella term for a variety of branches of Dutch Calvinism. The approximately 230,000 orthodox reformed Christians (about 1.33% of the country's population) share a number of characteristics, which arguably legitimizes the use of the umbrella term. Orthodox reformed Christians embrace traditional Calvinist views of theological, moral, and social issues. They think of themselves as tradition-oriented and leadership-based, in contrast with liberal reformed Christians, who understand themselves as change-oriented and dialogue-based (Watling 2002). They consider Scripture (the 1637 State Translation of the Bible) the absolute norm and authority, and embrace the 'Three Forms of Unity', the

2 See the website of the SRK, the central organization of Conservative Laestadians in Finland <<https://srk.fi/en/>>, accessed February 7 2020.

Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dordt as the creeds of faith (Stoffels 2008, 129). Furthermore, they emphasize the necessity of individual interior existential struggle and conversion, while holding that 'true' conversion, and therefore salvation, is not open for all but depends on God's intervention (Stoffels 2008, 129). In moral and social terms orthodox reformed Christians adopt a gendered and sexualized countercultural position by maintaining the ideal of patriarchal marriage and family life to the exclusion of ideas about the equality of women and LGBTQ people. This position may have been strengthened in the dynamic with a surrounding society and culture (Derks et al. 2014) that has increasingly implemented liberal laws and policymaking, and is secularized in its increasing disaffiliation from mainline churches. In this context the recent positioning of Dutch Evangelicals and Calvinists against homosexuality and transgender identities must be understood as functioning as an identity marker.³ Orthodox reformed Christians are moreover associated with specific geographical regions – small towns and villages across what is called 'the Bible belt' – situated outside the urbanized and politically, economically, and culturally powerful region of the Netherlands ('the Randstad'). At the same time they often inhabit a privileged position: these communities are historically established, politically and institutionally well embedded, and considered to belong to Dutch society and history. However, this belonging is placed in tension, because it is viewed in anachronistic terms: orthodox reformed Christians are considered to belong to the Dutch past, and less to the present.

The different Conservative Laestadian and orthodox reformed theological histories, and their different forms of embeddedness in broader religious, political, and social contexts, enable the construction of specific female Conservative Laestadian and orthodox reformed identities and experiences (Rantala 2018; Watling 2002). Both these protestant traditions emphasize the need for 'conversion' through an individual awareness of human nature as sinful and mourning for one's own sins. Orthodox reformed Protestantism underlines the building of a personal and humble relationship with God or Jesus, and the necessity for pietist conversion, while Conservative Laestadians believe that the congregation and its members have been entrusted with the absolution of sins. Both traditions encourage self-discipline and a sober and modest way of life, encapsulated within a close-knit and protective

³ See David Bos's essay (2019) in which he analyses and contextualizes the early 2019 issuing of the Dutch version of the Nashville Statement by Evangelicals and Calvinists in voicing their opposition to 'persons adopting a homosexual or transgender self-conception'.

community. Conservative Laestadian and orthodox reformed subjectivities cannot be conflated. However, the commonalities among Laestadian and orthodox reformed Christians regarding notions of piety, the perception of religious and secular distinctive domains, and modes of female embodiment justify an analysis of the two novels about both traditions.

Novels and sense-making

The Finnish author Pauliina Rauhala published her debut novel *Heavensong* (*Taivaslaulu*) in 2013. The novel is a bestseller, with more than 29,000 copies sold in its publication year, and a winner of several national prizes such as the *Christian Book Prize*.⁴ In 2015 the novel was adapted for a theatre play⁵ by two Finnish theatre groups, further highlighting its popularity. *Heavensong* is a contemporary story of a young Conservative Laestadian couple and their family. Vilja and Alekski grow up in the Finnish 'Bible belt'. They fall in love and marry, and children soon follow. In our analysis we focus on the female protagonist Vilja and her struggles as a Conservative Laestadian woman and mother, but also reflect on how her representation contrasts with her husband's. Although we focus on *Heavensong*, it is worth mentioning that Rauhala's second novel *Sinbearers* (*Synninkantajat*), published in 2018, continues the saga of the same family – this time centring on the previous generation and the movement's recent history during the late 1970s. *Sinbearers* was a candidate for the Finlandia Prize, the most acclaimed national literature award. Rauhala's novels are fiction. However, the author draws on her personal experience of growing up and living as a Conservative Laestadian. Her novels have had a far-reaching influence both within the Conservative Laestadian community and in perceptions of Laestadianism in Finland at large.

4 In 2013 *Heavensong* sold 29,100 copies, making it to number nine in the list of bestselling Finnish fiction. The following year the novel also made it into the top twenty, selling 10,600 copies <<https://kustantajat.fi/tilastot/>>, accessed February 7 2020). Altogether, the novel has sold more than 67,000 copies, and it has been acclaimed by both critics and readers: among various acknowledgements literature bloggers chose it as the best Finnish fiction book in 2013, and it was given a 2014 literary award by The Booksellers Association of Finland <<https://www.gummerus.fi/en/authors/>>; <<http://www.helsinkiagency.fi/heavensong/>>, accessed February 7 2020). More than 2,200 people have rated or reviewed the novel on Goodreads, giving it an average rating of 3.88 <<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/18193975-taivaslaulu>>, accessed February 7 2020). The novel has been translated to Danish and Latvian, but there are no English translations at the time of writing <<http://dbgw.finlit.fi/kaannokset/lista.php?order=author&asc=1&lang=ENG>>, accessed February 7 2020).

5 For further analysis of the *Taivaslaulu* play see Wallenius-Korkalo 2018.

The bestselling Dutch author Franca Treur has written extensively on Dutch orthodox reformed Christian experiences. In 2009 she published the novel *Confetti on the Threshing Floor* (*Dorsvloer vol Confetti*). It was a bestseller, with 150,000 copies sold on publication, and it won several prizes.⁶ In 2014 the novel was adapted for a movie directed by Tallulah Hazekamp-Schwab. In 2018 Treur published the novel *Hear Now My Voice* (*Hoor Nu Mijn Stem*). At the time of writing the author is travelling across the Netherlands to discuss her new book with her critics. Both novels are about girls and women either within orthodox reformed Protestantism or who have left it. They are fictional stories, but the author uses her own experiences of growing up as an orthodox reformed girl in Zeeland, the Dutch southwestern province known for its large presence of orthodox reformed Christians. Her work reaches a broad and diverse audience, influencing Dutch cultural understandings of this particular religious tradition and community. We focus on Treur's first novel. *Confetti* is about the life of an orthodox reformed family on a farm, narrating the parents taking their children to church and working on the farm, the children going to school, the death of their grandfather, and the marriage of one of the sons. The only girl among six brothers, Katelijne, is at the centre of the story. The novel focuses on her experiences and place in the family. Katelijne struggles with some of the dictates of orthodox reformed Protestantism and its way of life. The later novel *Hear Now My Voice* again focuses on a female protagonist, the adult Gina, and her memories of her slow but steady disaffiliation from the orthodox reformed tradition and community (van den Brandt 2019b).

We use the term 'sense-making' in analysing the novels *Heavensong* and *Confetti*. As an exploratory tool this term enables us to focus on various aspects of both stories. Sense-making intentionally refers to the creation of meaning and an understanding of the world as an endeavour that is both intellectual and embodied, and often entangled. The notion of 'sense' embraced here thus includes intellectual sense (meaning-making), as well as the corporeal

6 *Confetti on the Threshing Floor* sold more than 150,000 copies on publication <<https://webwinkel.uitgeverijprometheus.nl/book/franca-treur/9789044616262-dorsvloer-vol-confetti.html>>, accessed February 7 2020). It was well received by both critics and readers. In 2010 Franca Treur was awarded the Selexyz Debut Price <<https://www.nu.nl/boek/2327553/franca-treur-wint-selexyz-debutprijs.html>>, accessed February 7 2020). First published in 2009, the novel saw its thirtieth edition in 2015. High-quality Dutch newspapers like NRC, Parool, and Volkskrant awarded the novel with four out of five stars <<https://www.francatreur.nl/dorsvloerolconfetti/pages/ontvangst.html>>, accessed February 7 2020). Almost 1,450 people have reviewed the novel on Goodreads, giving it an average rating of 3.18 <<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/7432826-dorsvloer-vol-confetti>>, accessed February 7 2020).

and emotional aspects of senses and sensualities. While much of the current discussions of senses and the body in the study of religion do not thematize gender as a category of difference (cf. Morgan 2012; Meyer 2015b; Vásquez 2011), here we centre-stage women's embodiment in processes of sense-making. As religious studies scholar John Corrigan suggests, there is a need to 'advance the study of religion and emotion through a focus on gender' (2017, 13). With an analysis of literary representations of women's sense-making as embedded within particular religious communities, we contribute a gendered understanding of senses, the body, and emotions. Sense-making includes people's relationships with the divine, emerging 'from a multifaceted socio-bodily dynamic' (Opas and Haapalainen 2016, 180).

In the following we analyse how the novels represent women's and girls' sense-making by focusing on women's creativity and imagination, and the female body. Feminist theologian Sheila Briggs defines narrative in her analysis of popular culture as 'an alignment of characters and plot, a story in which the protagonists reveal themselves in their actions' (2011, 90). Following this definition of narrative as an alignment of characters and plot, the novels we analyse arguably construct a narrative of sense-making. One of the primary tasks of women and girls in this narrative is to make sense of their place in the world and their experiences, selves, and God. For Vilja and Katelijne the imagination and the body are some of the crucial sources that inform their negotiation of faith and the traditions of the community.

Making sense through creativity and imagination

In both novels the negotiation of faith, tradition, and community is thematized through women's capacity for creativity and imagination. The disruptive potential of creativity and imagination is considered to be based on its potential to explore other possible world-making modes. We thus suggest that the capacity – and desire – for creativity and imagination is represented as threatening the coming into being of an ideal female Laestadian or orthodox reformed protestant subjectivity. In this section we explore the theme of creativity and imagination by examining the role of storytelling and art-making, and how these are tied to gendered embodied experiences. We thus demonstrate that according to the novels making life sensible happens through embedded and embodied performances (Cunliffe and Coupland 2011).

Confetti on the Threshing Floor describes the female protagonist Katelijne's childhood until she is about twelve years old. The novel emphasizes

Katelijne's love for stories and storytelling, which sometimes takes place within and sometimes against the boundaries of orthodox reformed thought and practice. This intellectual capacity and desire is represented as at times productive of the emergence of proper orthodox reformed subjectivity, and at times transgressing it. As the author has repeatedly emphasized during lectures and discussions,⁷ she intended the novel to be a reflection on the capacity of stories: a single dominant story of truth may thrive only when it excludes other potential stories, and a multiplicity of stories will always threaten the idea of the existence of a single story of truth. The theological and moral are intertwined in this line of reasoning: the acceptance of orthodox reformed Protestantism as the single truth encompasses notions of how to live a good life, which includes a rejection of inventing stories for fun, especially when these stories are considered to encourage the so-called worshipping of other things or beings besides God. According to orthodox reformed thinking this is exactly what fairy tales or magical stories do: they distract the faithful from the single truth and may even encourage idolatry. Representing the female child with a love for stories and storytelling therefore indicates potential transgression.

The love for stories and storytelling is brought to the fore, for example, when Katelijne visits her mother's sister in The Hague, where she enthusiastically reads fairy tales before bedtime – while acknowledging that fairy tales are forbidden for her. 'Katelijne understands very well why the fairy tale is wrong. Doves do not magically make clothes and shoes appear. That is pagan. But it does seem fun to her. This is what they call temptation' (Treur 2009, 39).⁸ Her curiosity becomes an embodied experience: Katelijne indulges in the pleasure of enjoying forbidden stories. She also at times creatively invents her own stories, which have various consequences throughout the novel. When Katelijne tells her brothers about dandelions in the cows' dung, the little boys' curiosity is raised, and they fall into the cesspit. Their grandfather dies of a heart attack after his attempt to save the boys. When Katelijne finds her grandmother mourning, she hopes to comfort her by inventing a story about her grandfather's conversion experience. While she succeeds in getting her grandmother to believe that

7 See for example the 2.5-hour book presentation and discussion with Franca Treur at an event called 'Franca Treur: She Has a Point?!' (*Franca Treur: Heeft Ze een Punt?!?*) hosted by the Reformed youth group 'Come to Nijkerk', which can be watched online: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=63rqtUpAZcs>>, accessed February 7 2020.

8 All translations of original Dutch and Finnish quotations from the two novels are made by this article's authors.

her husband may not have ended up in hell after all, she feels guilty for having lied. 'You cannot tell lies about the things that belong to the Lord' (Treur 2009, 199). The novel thus emphasizes the disruptive but generative potential of the capacity and desire for storytelling. Katelijne has learned that she should not be distracted from the single story of truth, but through her vivid imagination she explores the potentiality of other kinds of story and their embodied consequences in lived emotions: pleasure, fear, and guilt. According to the feminist theorist Sara Ahmed (2004) it is important not to ask what emotions *are*, but what they *do*. Here, we see that pleasure, fear, and guilt are represented as the embodied effects of transgressing the boundaries of 'proper' faith and practice. These emotions can be read as potentially feeding into Katelijne's desire to put things straight and strive for proper piety (Kloos and Beekers 2017), or as potentially leading her further astray (Streib 2014). The narrative does not provide closure, and allows both interpretations.

In *Heavensong*, the female protagonist Vilja is portrayed as an imaginative and creative person with a vivid interest in art, especially painting. Early in the novel Vilja is studying visual arts at a university in Helsinki, where she meets her future husband, Aleksi. Vilja hopes to continue her art studies and work after marrying Aleksi, but the reality of their growing family and her near annual pregnancies make her surrender these dreams. 'My diploma is finished when translucent fingers become fat,' Rauhala writes in Vilja's voice, 'my doctoral thesis is ready when a suction cup mouth blossoms into a toothless laugh,' then 'God will applaud in heaven' (Rauhala 2013, 11). However, Vilja finds it difficult to abandon her plans and her bodily autonomy. Vilja's struggles are condensed into an epilogue in the novel, in which a woman is digging a hole in the ground. The woman makes a last painting and begins her excavation. Onlookers, religious leaders, fellow believers, and other female excavators spur her on. The act of excavation is at times happy and exciting for her. As time passes, and the hole deepens, it becomes more difficult, and she tires. Eventually, she hits the impenetrable bedrock, and is gravely injured. She is still encouraged not to give up. She decides to die rather than quit the excavation. It is only the intervention of her husband – who closes the excavation site – that allows the woman to return to the surface and start recovering. The epilogue is arguably a metaphor for the life of Vilja and Conservative Laestadian mothers generally. The excavation story symbolizes and attempts to encourage readers to reflect on women's struggles as they are expected to endure repeated childbirths. The 'single story of truth' for Conservative Laestadian mothers is indeed a

story of endurance and sacrifice. Vilja goes against the grain, because she is unable to endure what is expected of her, and is vulnerable and in need of help. The epilogue's symbolic portrayal of Vilja's 'straying from the path' (Kloos and Beekers 2017) is presented through notions of Laestadian women's embodied suffering and fatigue as a matter of life and death. This is followed by Vilja questioning her own notions of selfhood and a good life.

Vilja becomes severely depressed, but she eventually recovers. One sign of her healing is her taking up painting again. Such a creative agency, while frowned on in the religious community, is an outlet for Vilja; it becomes one of the ways in which the traumatic experience of repeated pregnancies and depression is healed, allowing her to gain some reflexive distance from Conservative Laestadianism. Vilja's artistic expression can be read not only as what she does, or an unfolding of who she is, but as requiring the female character's 'conscious willed effort' and wilful subjectivity (Ahmed 2014, 151) to negotiate the contradictions in her everyday life. Vilja wishes to be loyal to her faith and community while she fails at the same time to be a proper Laestadian subject. According to the novel sense-making is thus the result of a conglomeration of the intellectually embodied thoughts and experiences of the reflexive female subject in relation to her culturally situated meaningful practices.

Wilfulness can take the form of deliberate acts of loyalty or expressions of disloyalty and disaffiliation. Both novels construct a notion of the wilfulness of their female characters' imagination, represented through their storytelling and artistic creation, which points to their appropriation of and negotiation with conservative Protestantism-as-lived. The novels include fantasy and desire in accounts of agency and subjectivity (Bracke 2008, 63–64) by thematizing the role of art-making and storytelling in narratives of sense-making. Examining the ways in which art-making and storytelling are enabled, expressed, and restrained according to such narratives provides us with an insight into the fictional representation of (im)proper protestant female characters.

Making sense of women's bodies and experiences

In both novels the body, assumed to be in thrall to the cultural regimes (Richardson and Locks 2014; Foucault 1977, 25) of Conservative Laestadianism or orthodox reformed Protestantism, is a crucial area in which notions of belonging and transgression are formulated. In this section we explore how the two novels represent their female characters as experiencing their

bodies through issues of childbearing, beauty, love, and sexuality. We examine how these experiences are considered to raise moral contestations, becoming experiences that inform the female characters' negotiations with their traditions and communities.

Heavensong emphasizes the embodied experience of childbearing. Rauhala's female characters look at each other's bellies first, and their eyes only after. As birth control is avoided in the movement, the number of children in Conservative Laestadian families is noticeably high. In Conservative Laestadianism women's primary role is motherhood, and women's religiosity is tightly bound to their role of raising new generations. Children are seen as God's gifts to their parents, but repeated childbearing also significantly dictates the life choices of Conservative Laestadian women, evoking a multiplicity of emotional reactions, ranging from gratitude to weariness, guilt, and shame (Hintsala 2016; Koho 2016). Conservative Laestadian women's aspirations of faith, motherhood, and womanhood are irrevocably intertwined (Rantala 2018; Ruoho and Ilola 2014). *Heavensong* takes up the theme of childbearing and motherhood, presenting its main female character as struggling with and negotiating her embodied position within the Conservative Laestadian cultural regime. During the novel Vilja gives birth to four children and struggles to recognize, make sense of, and live with her rapidly cyclically changing body and spiralling emotions. Vilja feels like a prisoner of her body: 'I bleed, I stop bleeding, I carry a child, and I bleed again, and this is all that I am to expect' (Rauhala 2013, 38).

One of the narrative's turning points comes when Vilja falls pregnant again, this time with twins, which leads her to question the strength of her body, mind, and faith. Vilja tries to reconcile her strong Conservative Laestadian conviction and the reality of her utter exhaustion, which eventually lands her in hospital suffering from severe depression. Another important moment in the narrative is at the end, when it is not Vilja who takes the final step away from Conservative Laestadianism, but her husband Aleks. Aleks secretly undergoes sterilization to prevent the family from growing, while hoping to give Vilja time to heal. This leads to Aleks's casting out from the community, while Vilja can still remain within it.

In addition to the fundamental questions of motherhood and childbirth, another contested issue the novel presents concerns the norms of female appearance and beauty. Conservative Laestadianism adheres to an ideal of both internal and external modesty, which means the excessive adornment of the body is often considered sinful. Enhancing one's looks symbolizes not being a proper female Laestadian subject, and the lack of make-up and

revealing clothing constructs a visible boundary between Conservative Laestadian women and other women. This embodied contrast is mirrored and mediated through fictional Laestadian characters (Wallenius-Korkalo and Valkonen 2016, 43). *Heavensong* makes Vilja repeatedly reflect on the difference between herself as a Conservative Laestadian woman and the secular(ized) majority of women. When she looks at advertisements in shop windows featuring scantily clad and heavily made-up women, she concludes that mainstream society is not interested in women who have 'a naked face and a dressed body' (Rauhala 2013, 36).

A revealing moment in the narrative is when Vilja transgresses the modesty norms by painting her toenails bright red and flaunting them to her husband. He is conflicted: he feels both physically excited by the beauty of his wife's feet and appalled by her embodied transgression, while at the same time asking himself why the painted toenails should have anything to do with faith at all. His struggle to make sense of the painted toenails takes place at intellectual, moral, and embodied levels in an entangled way. However, applying nail polish continues to represent a transformation or signal an insurgency, a breaking away from the community. If discovered by other members of the community, such actions might lead, the reader is told, to exclusion from it. Vilja reminisces about her mother, who also painted her toenails to cheer herself up in preparation for her eleventh childbirth. Vilja's mother's transgression is narrated as leading to an almost unavoidable clash. Having given birth, another Laestadian mother notices Vilja's mother's transgression in the hospital showers, and a few days later she is made to publicly repent of her sins to retain her place in the community. The narration of this seemingly arbitrary act, the painting of one's toenails, thus highlights the struggle with the narrow ideal of acceptable female embodiment in Conservative Laestadianism, and the dire consequences transgressions may have for an individual (Wallenius-Korkalo 2018, 178–179).

The beauty and adornment of the female body is also a crucial theme in the coming-of-age novel *Confetti*. While staying with her aunt in The Hague, Katelijne tries on extravagant dresses and make-up, and poses for a picture. Katelijne clearly enjoys the adorning of her body, and her body being admired, while an ideal female orthodox reformed body is a humble one. At home again Katelijne finds a traditional costume that belonged to the deceased mother of her grandmother, and she tries it on. While parading across the farm, she is barely noticed by her family members. The novel thus sets up a paradox between the city and the countryside, the modern and the traditional, by emphasizing different forms of female embodiment.

In orthodox reformed discourse these distinctions are considered to collide with a secular godless as opposed to a religious domain, where salvation may be attained. The novel seems to play with notions of visibility and invisibility, as the plot conveys the message that proper female embodiment equates to invisibility. While Katelijne feels welcome and admired in The Hague, she feels almost invisible back at home. She starts to write letters to Gloria, her aunt's neighbour, and starts 'dreaming of moving to the city, where she can hear the trains passing while falling asleep in her bed. Where else is she supposed to go with her unrealistic desires?' (Treur 2009, 40).

One of the young girl's main drivers becomes her desire to be seen. Katelijne's transgressive desire to be valued as an individual and considered beautiful by other human beings is dangerous if it is not combatted and contained within the formation of a proper orthodox reformed subject. While in The Hague, Katelijne indulges in several forbidden pleasures at the same time: as described in the former section, she reads fairy tales before bedtime. She not only reads forbidden stories that trigger her imagination, but also tries out what it is like to dress immodestly and to emphasize female beauty and be admired. Both seem to feel good, though forbidden.

The increasing fascination with love and sexuality is another important theme of the novel that is worth exploring as the representation of a girl's embodied experience. Katelijne's maturing and transforming body is a source of anxiety, which is increased by her father and brothers teasing her about her body weight. Her anxiety and shame intersect with erotic desire, as Katelijne, while secretly visiting the fair in the local town with her brother and his friends, 'suddenly wants to be touched by the boy' (Treur 2009, 157). She also witnesses her elder brothers becoming involved with girls. Kathelijne's favourite brother, Christiaan, is made to marry Petra, a girl with whom he has slept. Katelijne observes that for Petra, who is clearly in love, her dream is coming true, but Christiaan is very unhappy about marrying her. The novel makes Katelijne laugh about the orthodox reformed patriarchal formulations of marriage read by the minister during the church wedding. This episode in the novel can be read as one of the experiences that makes Katelijne question the theological-moral tenets of her faith. However, the theological, moral, and communal aspects are presented as interrelated in a way that makes them difficult for readers to disentangle. If Christiaan does not live up to the dominant moral expectations that he will marry the girl, he will certainly have problems with his own family, but he may also find himself completely excluded from the

orthodox reformed church and community, which is said to be the only way to God's grace.

In both novels the key embodied experiences that inform the characters' negotiations with their faith and communities can be conceptualized as bodily transformations (cf. Brubaker 2016). These transformations are thoroughly gendered. A poignant female bodily transformation is the cycle of repeated pregnancies, over which the female characters in *Heavensong* have no control unless they or their spouses are prepared to leave the faith community. Briefer and perhaps voluntary moments of bodily transformation concern the changing of one's appearance with clothes or cosmetics. These transforming acts stem from a desire to be beautiful and feel good, and are narrated as at times taking place while negotiating faith, and at other times as directly challenging conservative protestant norms and practice. Both novels therefore consider bodily transformations to be key elements in the female characters' struggle with their traditions and communities.

Conclusion

In this article we have analysed how the novels of Rauhala and Treur represent women and girls negotiating Conservative Laestadianism and orthodox reformed Protestantism. Creativity and imagination, and the body, are important sources of women's agentic struggle with and making sense of their faith and belonging in the novels. The examples we have discussed as illustrating women's creativity and imagination, and embodied experiences, include storytelling and art-making, beauty, sexuality, and pregnancy. Our analysis has shown that creativity and imagination, and the body, are presented as entangled in the act of sense-making. Sense-making is considered the result of a conglomeration of the intellectually embodied thoughts and experiences of the reflexive female subject, which are interspersed with notions of the female body. Art is perceived as the means through which the traumatic experience of repeated pregnancies and depression is healed. Trying immodest clothing and make-up and being admired are presented as ways of imagining potential alternative femininities. The imagination and the body inform the female characters' making sense of their place in the community and tradition, but are simultaneously areas through which their faith and belonging are marked and contested.

From here we zoom out to reflect on the role these novels play in the societies in which they are produced and widely consumed. We thus address broader issues of representation and the place of conservative protestant

communities in contemporary secular(ized) Northern and Western European contexts. While cultural productions may be closely related to some individual and collective ways of being and knowing, perhaps especially when they are partly based on the authors' experiences as in *Heavensong* and *Confetti*, they are at the same time constitutive of perception. This insight highlights 'the complex intersections between public culture and private subjectivity' (Pickering 2009, 18). In stories about women and girls in conservative protestant communities, cultural productions represent female subjectivities in ways that need to be (sufficiently) legible and must therefore relate to existing discourses about women and the religious tradition being discussed. Constructing stories about Conservative Laestadians and orthodox reformed Christians in the Finnish and Dutch contexts entails representing communities that differ from mainstream values and ways of life. The fact that the stories we have studied here find broad and diverse audiences does not imply an uncritical interest in conservative protestant subjectivities. On the contrary, as religious studies scholar Sofia Sjö and sociologist Andreas Häger put it, it may entail an 'othering' of those forms of religion that do not fit the norm (Sjö and Häger 2015, 40). Conservative protestant communities in Northern and Western European contexts are often represented stereotypically, and women and girls who belong to such communities especially are often negatively portrayed as victims.

Since these novels critically thematize the role, positions, and experiences of girls and women in conservative protestant communities, they arguably easily confirm existing notions about conservative communities as rigid in their gendered regulation of the lives of girls and women, and secularized culture as free and emancipatory (Scott, 2017). The novels can thus be seen as reinforcing dominant understandings of conservative religion and women's emancipation. However, the novels' portrayal of communities and characters cannot be narrowed down to black and white stereotypes. Our analysis demonstrates that representations of conservative protestant women and girls can differ. *Heavensong* and *Confetti* present multi-layered and nuanced stories about the perspectives and experiences of conservative protestant women and girls that cannot be easily categorized as oppression, submission, or emancipation. We have revealed the novels' understanding of conservative protestant female subjectivity as a process of becoming and sense-making embedded in a tensioned terrain of creativity, imagination, embodiment, and sensibilities. They also convey an understanding of experiences of dissonance and conflict as an important arena in which women's religious subjectivities are both contested and shaped. We therefore suggest

that *Heavensong* and *Confetti* contribute interesting and relevant perspectives on the lives of women and girls in conservative protestant communities that defy the more common one-sided understandings of this type of lived religion. Such representations of everyday lived religion in fiction may challenge readers to rethink the potential agency of religious women. Nevertheless, in the secularized societies of Northern and Western Europe, we argue that constructions of the religious and gendered other can contribute to shielding secularized culture from view, and thus to strengthening its 'normality' and normativity.

* * *

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