
An Ethics of Response

Protestant Christians' Relation with God and Elsewheres

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■ **ABSTRACT:** How do Protestants engage with Elsewheres, such as God and other parts of the world? While anthropologists of Christianity have focused on the problems of presence and 'mediating' God, this article considers instead the concept of 'responding' to God/Elsewheres. In examining Lutheran women in early-twentieth-century Norway who held monthly mission meetings, I begin with their decision to remove crafts from their meetings, which created a different blend of sound and silence. I argue that, in their view, quiet listening was the most proper response to calls from Elsewhere and thus allowed them to have the most far-reaching effects. In other words, their right affect would affect Elsewheres. We gain a fuller anthropological description of this complex engagement with God/Elsewheres if we include their understanding of the responsibility to respond.

■ **KEYWORDS:** Christianity, crafts, God, listening, mission meetings, sound and silence, women's groups

"Never bazaar."

In September 1902, five women, all teachers, gathered in Kristiania, Norway. They had invited around 15 of their female colleagues, but only five showed up. Although they felt discouraged, they still resolved that—as had already happened in Sweden—they would form an organization called the Female Teachers' Mission Association (*Lærerinnenenes Misjonsforbund*, or LMF).¹ They would meet on the last Saturday of each month to join in the growing Protestant mission to save the 'heathen' across the world. They knew there were already thousands of Lutheran 'mission women's groups' (*misjonskvinneforeninger*) across Norway, in which women came together every month to work on handcrafts. They periodically sold their crafts, often at 'mission bazaars', and donated the money to the mission—most often to the Norwegian Missionary Society. However, the female teachers in Kristiania felt strongly skeptical of this. They were not opposed to crafts per se, but they did not want crafts at their new gatherings, and they recorded the following decision in their minutes: "never bazaar" (Tjelle 2002: 73).² In this article I wish to pause at this moment of decision and ask, why did these women choose to bar crafts?

Taking an ethnographic approach to their monthly mission meetings, I show that by removing crafts the women assembled sound and silence in a new way. Rather than the traditional



hum of spinning wheels and the rhythmic click of knitting needles, they wanted the sound of one voice speaking while those in the room were silent and listened. I will argue that they thought this was a better *response* to multiple Elsewheres—God and missionaries, women in Norway and in faraway lands. Moreover, they maintained that if their responsive listening was carried out with the right affect, it would produce *effects* on these Elsewheres. For example, their listening in Norway might increase the blessing among ‘heathen’ women in Madagascar, thus contributing to the salvation of the world.

I suggest that this case can help us better understand the concerns of this special section—the broader question of how Christians and Muslims engage with Elsewheres. Amira Mittermaier (2011, 2012) uses the term ‘Elsewhere’ in her research on dreams among Sufi communities in Cairo. She is interested in those dreams that come to dreamers from this Elsewhere. Rather than thinking of Muslims’ use of dreams as (only) a form of self-cultivation, she suggests that we might also think anthropologically about the dreamers’ relation to Elsewhere. Elsewhere stands in a continuum with the here and now, but is associated with God, the prophetic realm, saints, or a thin in-between space (*barzakh*). While Mittermaier uses a range of terms to describe this relation, I will focus here on the term that to me is most relevant to the anthropology of Christianity, namely, ‘response.’³

‘Response’ has not been a prominent category in anthropological studies that address Christians’ engagement with God. Instead, a widely cited analytical concept has been that of ‘mediation.’⁴ Mediation might briefly be defined as the practices that Christians undertake to make their invisible God ‘present.’ The mediation turn has been highly productive in its emphasis on the affective, bodily, and material qualities of Christian practice—what Birgit Meyer (2010, 2011) has called ‘sensational forms.’⁵ At the same time, it seems to me there are reasons to query this relatively concentrated focus on the ‘problem of presence’ (Engelke 2007). I have argued instead that Protestant Christians’ engagement with the transcendent is more accurately described as an unstable composite relation, that is, a relation made up of many moving strands. Christians’ desire for God to be present with them is one of these strands—and it is an important one. But I think there are also other strands, some of which may include critique, refusal, witness, absence, immediacy, failure, repetition, and hope/waiting (Hovland 2018). Here, I explore Mittermaier’s ‘response’ as yet another strand in Christians’ relation with Elsewhere.

I will not use the term ‘response’ to form an argument about situated ethical principles, as it is sometimes employed in theological, phenomenological, and philosophical studies.⁶ Instead, I will use it as a descriptive category that arises from the material under consideration (as does Mittermaier). In other words, ‘response’ is here a term that allows us as anthropologists to gain a richer understanding of what the mission women in Norway thought they were doing.⁷ The Protestant women I discuss associated response with obligation and agency, and I refer to this combination as an ‘ethics of response.’ I do not think that this ethics of response is limited to this particular Protestant tradition. Mittermaier (2012) also refers to a similar orientation among Sufis in Cairo. For her interlocutors, the understanding that dreams might come from an Elsewhere highlighted “the ability—or obligation—to respond. The recognition that agency does not rest exclusively with the individual dreamer does not mean that responsibility is *displaced* onto other agents ... Responsibility rather can come *through* the dream” (ibid.: 261; original emphasis). However, among the Lutheran women at hand, the ethics of response began to encompass not just a transcendent Elsewhere in the singular (as perceived by Mittermaier’s interlocutors), but multiple other Elsewheres that they imagined as groups or spaces, such as ‘heathen women,’ or ‘the whole world.’

I shall first describe the ‘crafting meetings’ of the traditional mission women’s groups, and will then examine what I call the new ‘listening meetings’ of the female teachers in Kristiania.

I will discuss how the women perceived themselves to be responding with right affect to ‘Elsewheres that call’. In conclusion, I will outline what this tells us about how anthropologists might more fully describe Protestant Christians’ engagement with Elsewheres.

Crafting Meetings

“Come over and help us!” is the informal title of a painting that has been a central image in the history of the Norwegian Missionary Society.⁸ The life-size painting depicts three Africans on a beach, looking out over the ocean toward a sailing ship (behind which the sun is rising) and greeting it with outstretched arms. Different black-and-white versions of the same image formed the front-page banner of *Norsk Missionstidende*, the Norwegian Missionary Society’s magazine, for over 70 years (from 1883 to 1911 and 1925 to 1966). Mission friends looking at the painting knew that it represented the ship bringing missionaries to other lands. It captured well, in a single powerful image, the evangelical revivalist perception of being ‘called’.

Protestant overseas missions were still a relatively unknown activity in Norway in the early nineteenth century. But the evangelical revivals of the 1830s and 1840s led to a wave of Norwegian Lutheran concern for others across the globe, in particular whether these others would be ‘saved’. The concern led to a new type of organization—the Norwegian Missionary Society. It also gave rise to a new social form among women: mission women’s groups. One of the first of these was founded in the early 1840s by Gustava Kielland, a pastor’s wife in Stavanger. Kielland had accompanied her husband to a public meeting about Protestant missions, and in her 1882 memoirs she accounted: “What I heard there made a deep impression on me. I became so shameful and sorrowful that I had had such lukewarm thoughts about the mission cause” (cited in Dons 1925: 12–13). She felt strongly that she needed to respond.

Kielland immediately invited four other women to hold a mission meeting with her at the parsonage, one day each month. They sang one Christian song together and then turned to the handcrafts they had brought with them. Children were present. Kielland described the meetings as follows: “It was often difficult to read aloud or talk together during the meetings because the spinning wheels spun, the carders rustled, the knitting needles and sewing needles moved quickly in busy hands” (cited in Dons 1925: 14). The women took a break for coffee and sandwiches and, during this quieter time, one of the women would read aloud a story or pamphlet related to the mission. Then they talked with each other about the story—or about home matters. Soon, up to 30 women were joining in the monthly mission meeting at the parsonage. Periodically, they sold the crafts they made at these social sales events, which in later decades became known as ‘mission bazaars’, and donated the money to the Norwegian Missionary Society.

The mission women’s meetings had surprising success. Only six decades later, by the turn of the twentieth century, the number of mission women’s groups had grown to between 3,000 and 4,000, and around 75 percent of the Norwegian Missionary Society’s income came from their donations (Tjelle 1999: 175, 181). Scholars who have studied the mission women’s movement in Norway have argued for its significance as part of the cultural trend toward broad-based democratization, given the large number of women involved across the entire country (Norseth 2007; Skeie and Norseth 2003). I take up a related anthropological question, namely, what the women themselves thought they were doing.

Ethnographers of meetings have suggested that meetings do not just assemble words, papers, bodies, ideas, and activities. They also, “by definition” (Brown et al. 2017: 13), refer to something beyond themselves—what Simone Abram (2017: 28) calls the meeting’s “conjured context.” Moreover, meetings officially tend toward organization, although this does not mean

that they are per se organized, or that unorganized matters are always resolved (Brown et al. 2017: 15, 23). What did the meetings of the mission women assemble? And what did they tend toward organizing? Which affects were put together to achieve effects? One bundle of associations that they moved toward organizing was that between Norwegian women, crafts, affects of ‘response’ and ‘responsibility’, and faraway ‘heathen’. One woman, Bolette Gjør, later recalled her participation in a mission women’s group in the 1850s: “I sat as if in a church, and the work seemed to me so holy. With happy wonder I had to ask: Is it really possible that these stitches I am now knitting will contribute to saving souls in heathen lands?”⁹ This was a new way of using needlework. Later, one of the female teachers in Kristiania, Henny Dons (1925: 17–18), commented that because women in the nineteenth century had little opportunity “to use their abilities in outer action beyond the purely domestic,” these first mission women’s meetings must have felt like “something of a revolution in the women’s world.” Despite the fact that the meetings were held in homes and centered on handcrafts, their new assembling of crafts with worldwide concerns about salvation tended toward a new organization that went beyond the ‘purely domestic’. The women oriented themselves toward a new ‘conjured context’, that is, ‘heathen lands’.

Another bundle of associations that the meetings assembled were those of particular sounds and silences. The meetings created a “sonic-scene” in which sounds became intertwined with layers of affective and political concerns (Kasmani 2017). One layer was the actual sounds of the craftwork, the children, the coffee, the conversations, and a story being read aloud. At another level, there was the question of whether the meetings were, metaphorically, sufficiently ‘quiet’. For example, Bolette Gjør recalled that some people criticized these noisy women’s meetings for running counter to “a woman’s quiet conduct,”¹⁰ echoing the words of the New Testament: “she is to keep silent” (1 Timothy 2:12). On the other hand, some women must have tried to hold different types of mission meetings in which they primarily read and prayed and thus were indeed more ‘quiet’, for statements were printed in *Norsk Missionstidende* in 1866 and 1867 arguing that women’s mission meetings must focus on work—that is, crafts—and not reading or prayer.¹¹ In other words, the new evangelical mission movement prompted the question of what it meant for women to be ‘quiet’ in a new context. As a point of comparison, there were no arguments at the time over what it meant for women to be quiet in the regular Lutheran Sunday services, which they attended together with men. Instead, the problem of women’s ‘quietness’ became contentious only in the mission movement because women were starting to gather in meetings without men.

The New Testament texts that encourage women to be quiet sometimes refer to literal silence (women not making a sound) and sometimes to metaphorical silence (women submitting to men).¹² Only one of these themes seems to have been picked up in the pietistic Lutheran milieu around the new mission women’s groups in Norway, namely, metaphorical silence. Therefore, despite the initial questioning, it gradually became broadly acceptable for Christian women to gather around humming craftworks and converse together, while it was still not common for Christian women to gather together for quiet prayer. The consensus that emerged among nineteenth-century Norwegian Lutherans was that the sound the women made was not in itself a problem. Thus, the women managed to establish a new type of affective-political ‘sonic-scene’ in their noisy, innovative gatherings, while still remaining within the larger framework of metaphorical ‘quietness’. This opened up new possibilities. Most interestingly for this discussion, it enabled the women to respond with affect to multiple Elsewheres beyond their homes: ‘heathen lands’, and ‘God’s call’ for them to help with the ‘worldwide mission’. But the more intriguing turn in the history of the women’s meetings came in the early twentieth century when five female teachers decided to change this format.

Listening Meetings

In 1902, when the five women in Kristiania established the Female Teachers' Mission Association (LMF), the "Come over and help us!" picture was still on the front page of the Norwegian Missionary Society's magazine. Later, one of the five LMF founders, Henny Dons (1925), echoed this message when she wrote that it was not just the heathen on the African coast who were calling; rather, "*Christ* is calling those women who have received his salvation" (ibid.: 7; emphasis added). In response to this cry, the women in LMF began holding meetings on the last Saturday afternoon of each month.

LMF proved popular; in 1917 it had reached 1,000 members, around 20–25 percent of all female teachers in Norway at that time (Tjelle 2002: 70–71). It also became influential. LMF members paid an annual membership fee and were sometimes asked for additional donations. Instead of simply sending this money to a mission organization (as the traditional mission women's groups did), LMF entered into negotiated agreements with the organizations—primarily the Norwegian Missionary Society—so that the money they donated would support the salary of selected female missionaries. I focus on the LMF group in Kristiania (later Oslo), which had 229 paying members in 1927 (LMF 1927: 72–78) and kept handwritten minutes of its meetings.

What was different about the LMF gatherings? Instead of coming together in a home, the LMF women seem to have usually met in a church hall.¹³ They did not bring crafts, and they did not arrange bazaars. This was not because they were categorically opposed to crafts or the idea of bazaars. In fact, Henny Dons helped to establish a Home Crafts Circle in 1918, in part to encourage people to work on crafts "in their spare time at home," and then sell them at a mission sale and donate the money to the Norwegian Missionary Society.¹⁴ But crafts were not brought to the LMF meetings. Moreover, there was conversation between the women only at certain specified times. The meetings usually opened with a collective song and a prayer. A woman (or sometimes an invited man) then gave a lecture on an aspect of the history of Christian mission or on a Bible passage, while the assembled women sat still and listened. Sometimes one of the women read aloud news from female missionaries in Zululand (South Africa), Madagascar, Santalistan (India), or China—either from a letter or from published pieces in mission magazines. The minutes occasionally record that they enjoyed coffee, tea, and sandwiches. Finally, there was always a 'prayer time' at the end of each meeting, as one of the women prayed aloud while the others joined in silently.

The LMF format was clearly different from the Norwegian Missionary Society's traditional mission women's groups, and Henny Dons in fact tried to influence these traditional meetings. She was employed by the Society in 1917 as its 'children's secretary', and in this capacity she sometimes visited the traditional groups that gathered around crafts and conversation. However, she thought there was room for improvement. For example, in one letter to the general secretary of the Norwegian Missionary Society, she pointed out what seemed to her a lack of "understanding and interest" in the mission cause in the traditional mission women's meetings; a few years later she reported that these meetings lacked "life and energy."¹⁵ Rachel Lange, a 'female traveling secretary' in the Norwegian Missionary Society, also regularly visited the traditional groups and reported the same observation:

Many of the leaders in our women's groups do not have the boldness to hold a devotion, or to pray aloud or read from God's word ... [There is] often a lot of talking, in many places they talk so that they almost cannot bear to be silent even when one is standing there and telling them about the mission ... [What they want is:] drinking coffee, raffle tickets [at the bazaars], a lot of talking, first, last, and in between. Yes, it is sad in many places, unfortunately!¹⁶

In other words, Henny Dons and Rachel Lange, who were familiar with the LMF meeting format, described the traditional groups as assembling sounds and silences at the wrong times: the women were seen as talking constantly when they should have been listening quietly, but then being quiet when they should have had the boldness to speak out loud. Their conversation, while lively and energetic, did not display the *right* affective ‘life and energy’.

To explore this different understanding of affect in more detail, let me give two examples of meeting minutes that are broadly representative of the LMF group in Kristiania. The first is from March 1913.¹⁷ A male missionary had been invited to speak, and the minutes record, in abbreviated sentences: “Missionary Østby lecture on the work on Madagascar’s western coast. Spoke grippingly about a trip with the native evangelists to wild bandit tribes.” The missionary described how, even among these “bandit tribes,” such as the Sakalavas, “hearts and doors were open” for the gospel, and the minutes add: “Prayer for the *Sakalavas* was especially laid on our hearts” (original emphasis). However, the women were not just concerned with their relation to faraway Madagascar. They were also mindful of their relation to groups of women and Christians in Norway. Henny Dons announced that Miss Ragnaas would represent LMF at the upcoming National Meeting of the Norwegian Women’s National Council, and the group then selected Miss Essendrop to travel as their representative to the General Assembly of the Norwegian Missionary Society. The same Miss Essendrop then provided some “warm and heartfelt” words based on their “prayer text” (a selected verse from the Bible) to introduce their concluding prayer time, speaking “about *the work of the Holy Spirit*, about ‘the decisive hour’ for every single person and now for the whole world” (original emphasis).

What did this meeting assemble, and what did it tend toward organizing? The ‘conjured context’ of the LMF meeting in Kristiania in 1913 assembled several Elsewheres. First, there was the space that was often referred to in the minutes as “out there.” In this case, the story from ‘out there’ came from Madagascar, where some people were ‘wild’ but also possible candidates to join the worldwide community of Christians. Second, the meeting assembled organizational Elsewheres—the Norwegian Women’s National Council and the Norwegian Missionary Society. Third, there was the Elsewhere space of the Holy Spirit, as well as the associated space of ‘the whole world.’ By meeting, these Protestant women were connecting to the transcendent Elsewhere in the singular (in the sense that Mittermaier uses this term), but they were also connecting to multiple other conjured Elsewheres: to other women, to other Christians, to other people on the other side of the world, as well as to the idea of ‘the whole world.’ The meeting conveyed that a different world was possible, not just in terms of turning non-Christians into Christians, but also in terms of turning Norwegian women into important actors whose ‘decisive hour’ mattered on the world stage. The LMF women were elaborating here on their evangelical sense that they needed “to live with another possible space always in view” (Hovland 2016: 348): they assembled a different, hopeful world map of divinity and humanity. This hopeful map was overlaid on the actual world map, critiquing it and seeking to change it.

The second meeting I will consider took place in May 1918:

25 May 1918: ... The Norwegian flag brightened up between fresh spring flowers, at the chairman’s place stood a couple of delightful roses, and when she came to chair the meeting she was received most heartily. For it happened to be the case this time that our chairman was celebrating her birthday on precisely the LMF day, and we so wanted to show her our devotion and gratitude ... Miss Dons thanked us, very moved, and held a lecture based on our prayer text John 3:27–36 about this: *How can we through our mission work in LMF help each other to grow in our Christian life?* It is about *growing*—also when it comes to the work that we have taken upon ourselves out there. The stronger and more heartfelt *our* personal Christian

life and prayer life is, the richer will be the help and blessing for them *out there*. There is a constant back-and-forth between them and us ... let us try to *help* each other! Let us make use of the personal connection and try to ... share more with each other also of the *personal* experiences in our Christian life ... Strongly and intently she then laid this question on our hearts: “*Are you a take-it-for-granted Christian, or do you know what it is to be saved?*” ... Miss Helga Kristiansen, whom we are sending to Santalistan, was with us probably for the last time before her departure ... we bid her farewell and will promise to follow her too with our thoughts and prayers.¹⁸

Here we see even more clearly that these women were not just conjuring Elsewheres; they were also seeking to affect these Elsewheres. They believed that the more intimately they *felt, shared,* and *knew* that they were saved in Kristiania, the more heathen would be brought to the same salvation ‘out there.’ In this context, their own efforts to put together the right affects—in a personal, intense, mental, and emotional orientation toward salvation—must have stood out as a great responsibility. I think it seemed to the LMF women as if the fate of at least part of the heathen world was resting on whether they, in their meetings, were able to be *heartfelt* Christians. And their heartfelt Christianity would manifest itself in the right kind of Christian listening.

Elsewheres That Call

On 22 June 1912, a guided conversation was held in the Kristiania LMF meeting on the following topic: “From all the mission fields it is said that there are far too few female workers. A letter was mentioned, just received from Miss Ofstad [a female mission worker in Madagascar], in which this was stated firmly.”¹⁹ Not only did the LMF women assemble a world map of Elsewheres; they also assembled a map of cries and calls from these Elsewheres—from heathens, from female mission workers, from the mission fields, from Christ. Somewhat counter-intuitively, in order to do something in response to these calls, they replaced crafts with listening.

At first glance, the change from crafts to listening might appear to be a change from a more active mode to a more passive one. However, the LMF women do not seem to have thought of it that way. Rather, as mentioned above, in Henny Dons’s view the traditional women’s groups that gathered around crafting were the ones that lacked the right kind of ‘energy,’ producing sounds and silence at the wrong times. The LMF women assembled a new organization of sounds and silence that must have seemed to them more ‘energetic,’ or, in academic terms, more properly affective and therefore effective. Instead of the constant stream of sounds in traditional meetings—from wool carders and coffee cups, chatting and busy hands—the LMF meetings cultivated the sound of a singular female voice, or occasionally a male voice. The female bodies that were listening were still, without needles in their hands. This outline of listening, as it is framed in the minutes, likely reflects something of the ideal, stylized mode of listening that had developed in the group. Based on the minutes, we do not know whether all the women in the meeting were actually able to listen in this focused way. Nevertheless, the ideal seems to have been a listening that might be described as affective concentration and response: the women ought to *intently* hear what was said, and then *feel* something. As the minutes sometimes put it in their ideal description, the words that were spoken were “laid on our hearts.”²⁰

The responsive listening that these women developed had implications for ideas about authority. While the traditional women’s meetings were held in homes and cultivated a soundscape that evoked associations with the domestic sphere, the LMF meetings were instead held in church halls, with a type of speech and listening that evoked how people interact in a formal,

public sphere. In many ways, LMF meetings were modeled on school classrooms, in which LMF members as teachers spoke with authority to an audience. They were also modeled on the Lutheran church service (with which the women were very familiar), in which a male pastor spoke authoritatively to an audience. In fact, the LMF women sometimes alluded to this similitude by saying, for example, that LMF was “called to priestly service for Him.”²¹

It seems that by organizing their monthly meetings around listening quietly to authoritative speech, these women were creating public relationships between themselves, rather than domestic relationships. This created quite a different affective-political ‘sonic-scene’ than the traditional women’s meetings, during which Christian women were commonly expected to be ‘quiet.’ The traditional women’s groups fit this expectation, paradoxically, through their emphasis on *noisy* crafts. The LMF meetings, on the other hand, in many ways aimed to challenge the notion that Christian women ought to be ‘quiet,’ for example, by supporting women mission workers and elected representatives. But they did so, again paradoxically, by emphasizing the importance of *quiet* listening. They claimed the ‘quiet’ injunction for themselves, but wielded it with public authority.

However, the LMF meetings did not completely adopt the male-dominated church model of public silent listening. They added what seems to be their idealized understanding of a ‘feminized’ affective atmosphere. For example, as mentioned in the minutes above, the women decorated the room with “fresh spring flowers” and “delightful roses.” They used expressions of personal devotion to their chairperson, Henny Dons, who allowed herself to be “very moved” by the beauty and intimacy of the meeting, and this response was then recorded in the minutes. The intimate moment became officially recorded intimacy. The minutes also use adjectives that describe the atmosphere that the recorder wished to emphasize: the events in the meetings are regularly referred to as “beautiful,” “amazing,” “delightful,” “wonderful,” “lovely,” “peaceful,” “rich,” “atmospheric,” “enjoyable,” “cozy,” and “festive.”²² In other words, the women’s listening occurred not just in the context of public relationships among themselves, in which they took on ‘male’ authority. Instead, these relationships were placed within a particular ‘feminized’ affective environment, owned by the women.

Was this type of listening unusual? Anthropologists have described other examples of Protestant and Pentecostal listening, such as the American evangelicals who learn to hear God’s voice through training their absorptive capacities (Luhmann 2012), the British evangelicals who seek to practice attentive listening in church as well as ‘personal’ listening when reading the Bible (Strhan 2015), or the Ghanaian Pentecostals who ‘soak in’ God’s word through repeated listening to recorded sermons (Reinhardt 2014). In these cases, the listening of the Christians is oriented toward self-cultivation and toward God. One curious difference in the listening practices that developed among the Lutheran female teachers in Kristiania is that their listening was meant to transform their *response* to Elsewheres (including God) into *affecting* Elsewheres (including God). In other words, the listening had distributed effects that went beyond their own Christian selves. A second difference is that their listening represented a complex reinterpretation of the injunction for Christian women to be silent. By embracing women’s *literal* quietness in a new way (requiring still bodies in a meeting of only women, without men), they were able to stage a powerful rebuttal of women’s *metaphorical* quietness. It allowed them to claim a particular authority of their own.

In sum, it seems to me that an understanding had developed among the LMF women: by listening to calls from Elsewhere using a particular affective combination—quiet concentration, an intense response, a sense of obligation—they would affect Elsewheres. As the minutes above put it: “The stronger and more heartfelt *our* personal Christian life and prayer life is, the richer will be the help and blessing for them *out there*.”²³ Another way they phrased it was “God is willing

to give, if we will receive.”²⁴ They thought that if LMF women received, then God’s giving would not occur just in the LMF group, but—more crucially—Elsewhere. The women felt responsible for responding to the cries they heard. Their listening was a response that forged affective ties between themselves and Elsewheres, and would allow God’s power to work through these ties. Their listening would direct God’s blessing to places near and far; it was a new kind of aural affect that would help convert the whole world. In a sense, they viewed affect as something that could flow through co-created, human-transcendent, global assemblages. At the same time, their listening managed to combine their appropriation of public, ‘male’ authority with a ‘feminized’ affective environment, producing a new type of female Christian authority, and enabling the women to work with God.

Conclusion

Let me return to one of the first decisions that the LMF women recorded in their minutes in 1902, and which they carefully saved for later readers: “never bazaar.” Tracing the importance of this decision, we are able to see that the LMF women agreed with the traditional mission women’s groups that it was necessary to *respond* to the calls of the mission—the calls from manifold Elsewheres. But they thought that working on crafts together in a meeting was not the proper response. The traditional groups, in their view, did not assemble sound and silence well. These groups emphasized metaphorical quietness (such as subservience to male authority), rather than literal quietness. Instead, the LMF women experimented with literal quietness, arriving at a new language practice. They found that meeting as women, sitting still together and listening intently to gripping words, was the proper affective response to Elsewheres, and thus more effective. They broke with and also reclaimed the expectation that Christian women should be ‘quiet’. They allowed one woman at a time to speak aloud, with authority—thus challenging the expectation of metaphorical silence. But for the other women in the meeting, they emphasized the importance of literal quietness. More importantly, they recast what it meant to be ‘quiet’.

The concept of mediation, which has become established in the anthropology of Christianity, provides one insightful lens on this situation. It allows us to think of the women’s affective, concentrated listening as a ‘sensational form’ that mediated God, that is, made God present (Meyer 2010, 2011). Their meetings were an assembling of words, bodies, things, and affects that sought to organize God’s location in relation to the women. God was there, with them, and the divine Elsewhere had been brought near. But I argue that we see more strands of this relation when, not discounting the concept of *mediating* the presence of Elsewhere, we also think about the meetings as a way of *responding* to Elsewhere. One methodological advantage of the concept of ‘responding’ is that it allows us to describe more of the multi-stranded relation, and changes in this relation, between the women and Elsewheres. It highlights the complicated agency that these women were working with—both God’s and their own. Yes, they were *with* God, but they were also responding by working *for* God, by allowing God to work *on* them, and by opening themselves so God could work *through* them in Elsewhere places and peoples—in Madagascar, Santalistan, Zululand, China, and ‘the whole world’. Thinking more carefully about this orientation as an ethics of response thus allows us to consider a larger bundle of agencies in Christians’—and Muslims’—engagement with Elsewheres (cf. Mittermaier 2012: 252). It also allows us to see how, in their view, the LMF women were affecting God. While their God was all-powerful, he still wished them to *receive* so he could *give* in a series of changing engagements: God called them, they called missionaries, the non-Christians called them, they called God, God called them again.

So, we might ask, did the women's listening work? From their perspective, it likely did. Over the first half of the twentieth century, the Protestant worldwide mission grew, as did the number of people in Africa and Asia who identified as Christian (although these two historical events do not have a simple cause-and-effect relationship). In Norway, the LMF women and their allies did manage to create more public space for women in Christian organizations: women achieved the right to be elected onto the regional boards for the Norwegian Missionary Society in 1916; the Society established a Mission School for Women in 1920; and in 1939 women also achieved the right to sit on the Society's national board. However, even at the height of LMF's influence in the first half of the twentieth century, the Norwegian Missionary Society did not allow women to be ordained as pastors.²⁵

On the other hand, an outsider might notice that the LMF women's listening did not work in one important respect: the vast majority of the traditional mission women's groups across Norway did not adopt LMF's understanding that listening was the most proper response to the mission call. Perhaps the traditional groups felt uncomfortable with the idea of one woman speaking and others listening silently, which evoked associations with male-dominated public space and authority. Or perhaps the affect of concentrated listening that LMF demanded was experienced as too intense, especially compared to the relaxed atmosphere of the traditional gatherings around crafts, coffee, conversation, and raffle tickets. Or perhaps the traditional women had a sense that the most Christian response to 'heathen' calls was simply tangible action: make crafts, raise money.

While LMF continued to exist, its impact on the Norwegian Missionary Society receded strongly after World War II, likely echoing the overall contraction of the women's movement in Northern Europe at that time. Today, the common perception of mission women's groups in Norway resembles the traditional conversational crafting groups more than the intently listening LMF groups. The women still hold lively and noisy mission bazaars, where they raffle tickets to sell homemade crafts and baked goods, and then donate the money to the Norwegian Missionary Society (now renamed the Norwegian Mission Society). The particular listening meeting that developed among the LMF women in the first decades of the twentieth century—in which women experimented with a new assembling of sound and silence, God and the world, women and authority, decisions and effects—is no longer prevalent in this Lutheran tradition.

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 ■ NOTES

1. LMF Archive (hereafter LMF), Henny Dons: “LMF Minnebok,” 1–4; LMF, “Til norske lærerinder,” 20 November 1902. Henny Dons later said that they had invited 30 to participate (see LMF 1927: 5–6; cf. Tjelle 2002: 68, 84n4). The LMF Archive is held at the Mission Archive in Stavanger, housed by VID Specialized University. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.
2. Here Tjelle cites the first minute book of the Kristiania/Oslo LMF group (LMF Protokoll 1902–1911, 20 September 1902). This minute book went missing from the LMF Archive collection when it was moved to the Mission Archive in 2003.
3. For a study that extends Mittermaier’s work in another interesting direction in relation to the anthropology of Christianity, see China Scherz (2017). Scherz especially elaborates on ‘divine agents’.
4. One of the leading thinkers on religion as mediation is Birgit Meyer (2010, 2011; see also Engelke 2010). I have given a fuller overview of this literature in relation to Protestantism in Hovland (2018).
5. The attention to affect, bodies, and materiality has allowed anthropologists to ask new questions about religious communities, such as how to describe Christians’ sense of ‘belonging’ in a group (Dilger et al. 2018), or how to trace the unfolding intensities of a Pentecostal talk (Bialecki 2015).
6. While ‘response’ has not played a prominent role in the anthropology of religion, it has been used as an analytical lens in other fields, such as a strand of Protestant theological ethics that sees humans as being ‘in response’ to a God characterized by absolute sovereignty (e.g., Niebuhr [1963] 1999) (a different understanding of God than that held by the women discussed here); a critical philosophical phenomenology that posits that humans are called ‘to respond’ to life, even as life exceeds our conceptual categories, and that this response constitutes our world (e.g., Mattingly 2019); and a direction within moral philosophy that argues that we have an obligation to respond to—and to make response possible by—fellow ‘others’ on the earth (e.g., Oliver 2015).
7. Other scholars studying this mission culture have also noted the importance of the closely related term ‘calling’ (e.g., Mikaelsson 2003).
8. The title “Come over and help us!” is a reference to Paul’s vision in the New Testament, in which he received this call from a man in Macedonia (Acts 16). For an exploration of the painting’s connections to similar images and its evolving meanings in the Norwegian Missionary Society, see Gullestad (2007: 69–88).
9. Bolette Gjør in the magazine *Misjonslæsning for Kvindeforeninger*, cited in Dons (1925: 22).
10. *Ibid.*, cited in Dons (1925: 23).
11. *Norsk Missionstidende* (1866: 257; 1867: 25). Kristin Fjelde Tjelle (1990: 167–172) provides a good discussion of the statements, noting that in practice the mission women’s groups became more than merely ‘work groups,’ and that it became impossible for the Norwegian Missionary Society to fully monitor this development.
12. See especially 1 Corinthians 14:34–35; 1 Timothy 2:9–13; 1 Peter 3:1, 4.
13. See, for example, the location given (*Fagerborg menighetshus*) in LMF, Referatbøker, Oslo LMF 1911–1929, 27 October 1913 and 25 May 1918.
14. On the establishment of the Home Crafts Circle (Det Norske Missionselskaps Husflidsring), see the NMS Archive (hereafter NMS), HA 1842–1919, Gen-sek 90, Inn-brev-hjem 1919, Box 127-2, Dons: “Arbeidsoversigt for 1918.” After just two years, the Home Crafts Circle had over 300 members (NMS, HA 1842–1919, Gen-sek 90, Inn-brev-hjem 1920, Box 428-4, Dons to Nilssen, 3 September 1920; Inn-brev-hjem 1920–1921, Box 429-4, Dons to Nilssen, 21 February 1921), and it continued to operate for at least the next decade (Inn-brev-hjem 1930–1931, Box 442-4, Dons to Amdahl, 7 November 1931). Dons and her colleagues also arranged for crafts to be part of female missionaries’ training, and offered courses in crafts for leaders of children’s mission groups (see, e.g., NMS, HA 1842–1919, Gen-sek 90, Inn-brev-hjem 1909–1910, Box 118-4, Dons to the NMS Board, 23 August 1910, and Dons to Dahle, 12 September 1910; Inn-brev-hjem 1920, Box 428-4, Dons to Dahle: “Arbeidsoversigt 1919”). The NMS Archive can be found in the Mission Archive in Stavanger.
15. NMS, HA 1920–1970, Gen-sek 90, Inn-brev-hjem 1925–1926, Box 436-6, Dons to Amdahl, 13 September 1926; Inn-brev-hjem 1928–1929, Box 440-5, Dons: “Arbeidsoversikt for 1928.”

16. Archive of the Mission School for Women (Misjonsskolen for Kvinner, hereafter MFK), Box 72-1, Notebook by Rachel Lange, 29 April 1920. The MFK Archive is held in the Mission Archive. Cf. a similar comment on the groups by Bolette Gjør (MFK, 1901–1978, Book no. 2, Protokoll for Damekomiteen 1906–1920 and Protokoll for Forstanderskapet 1920–1938, Gjør to Dahle, 21 April 1907).
17. LMF, Referatbøker, Oslo LMF 1911–1929, 31 March 1913.
18. *Ibid.*, 25 May 1918; original emphasis.
19. *Ibid.*, 22 June 1912.
20. See, for example, LMF, Referatbøker, Oslo LMF 1911–1929, 26 December 1912; 27 October 1917; 28 October 1916.
21. LMF, Referatbøker, Oslo LMF 1911–1929, 28 October 1916; applying Revelation 1:5–6.
22. In Norwegian, the adjectives read as *vakkert*, *herlig*, *deilig*, *vidunderlig*, *nydelig*, *fredelig*, *rikt*, *stemningsfullt*, *hyggelig*, *koselig*, *festlig*, and so forth (LMF, Referatbøker, Oslo LMF 1911–1929).
23. LMF, Referatbøker, Oslo LMF 1911–1929, 25 May 1918; original emphasis.
24. *Ibid.*, 29 October 1927.
25. While the Lutheran Church of Norway took this step in 1961, the Norwegian Missionary Society waited until 1989, long after LMF had moved to the sidelines.

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