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## **Review of Dawn Llewellyn, *Reading, Feminism, and Spirituality: Troubling the Waves*, Basingstoke/ New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2015, xiii + 258 pp., ISBN: 9781137549952**

BY NELLA VAN DEN BRANDT, DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGIOUS  
STUDIES, UTRECHT UNIVERSITY, THE NETHERLANDS

This book by Dawn Llewellyn is published by the Palgrave MacMillan *Breaking Feminist Waves* series, edited by Linda Martin Alcoff and Alison Stone. The series aims to move away from the metaphor of waves as the conventional model for the development of feminist theory, concerns and movements, and as such to rethink what feminism is today, as well as its past and future trajectories. Instead of moving away, Llewellyn's book aims to 'trouble the waves', and to rethink the metaphor's assumptions about generational and cultural divisions among women. Moreover, Llewellyn wants to re-work 'the waves' in order to make this imaginary more inclusive. Ultimately, her ambition is to build connections between what are often considered to be different or even separate cohorts of feminist theory and movements: second versus third wave feminism; and secular feminist studies versus religious feminism (p. 4).

The book is organised in two parts. The first part, including Chapters 1 and 2, sets out the theoretical argument about the wave metaphor and the generational and secular meanings attached to it. The second part, Chapters 3–5, analyses women's spiritual reading through qualitative research methods as a third wave practice. The book concludes by presenting women's spiritual reading practices as calling for the need to reformulate our thinking in terms of waves.

In Chapter 1, 'Reading, Feminism and Spirituality', Llewellyn draws on feminist theology and literature to introduce the practice of women's spiritual reading. She argues for recognising reading as a spiritual resource for contemporary Christian women (belonging to various denominations, such as Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, Quaker, and Roman Catholic), and post-Christian women (those who have moved, or are in the process of moving, from Christianity to other forms of religiosity and spirituality, such as Paganism, Goddess feminism and Wicca, or to none). Llewellyn criticises what she conceptualises as the 'implied reader' in feminist theology, which means that, according to her, 'the actual reader' is a missing dimension of feminist theology's relationship to literature. Actual readers and their reading experiences are imagined, but remain

in the background, out of view. Llewellyn suggests to bring 'the actual embodied reader and her experiences' to view (p. 18). She develops a specific reader-centred feminist approach (Appendix A) based on semi-structured interviews with 36 Christian and post-Christian women about texts they perceive to have shaped their personal spiritual journeys.

Chapter 2, 'Talking in Waves', scrutinises the wave as a generational and secular metaphor. Llewellyn's argument is that two limiting and divisive sets of meanings are attached to the wave, which result in (assumptions about) distinctions between second and third wave feminists, and between third wave feminism and feminist theology. The author outlines the generational and secular/sacred disconnections created by the wave and suggests that such rigid distinctions are at odds with the third wave's search for multiplicity, fluidity, individuality and community. First, she discusses the wave metaphor as marking generational differences between second and third wave feminists on the basis of age-based parameters and the familial mother-daughter trope. Second, the author draws on the work of Penelope Margaret Magee (1995) to reveal the 'sacred/secular ideological structure' (2015: 42) as shaping the narrative about the development of feminism. This structuring device results in neglecting women's religious lives, as well as contributions made by feminist scholars in theology and religious studies. As such, the wave metaphor refers to a sacred/secular disciplinary divide and the development of feminism as a secular story. Llewellyn illustrates her claim by pointing at third wave scholars' neglect of religion and feminist theology's lack of engagement with the third wave as a disconnection that impoverishes both spheres. Analysing women's spiritual reading practices reveals these practices as embodied, lived instances of the third wave emphasis on individuality and community, through commonality.

Chapters 3–5 explore women's religious reading practices as thematised through the third wave angle of individuality, commonality and community. Chapter 3, 'Filtering the Canon', examines women readers' uses of the Bible. The author identifies 'filtering' (2015: 67) as a reading strategy employed by feminist theologians and women readers. Both feminist theologians and women readers utilise strategies for selecting texts, however, according to Llewellyn, they construct these strategies in different ways. The difference, lies in what is considered authoritative, and in various motivations for selection. Feminist theologians centre stage their (re)interpretation, women's spiritual reading practices are formed on the basis of individual spiritual journeys (2015: 68).

Chapter 4, 'Reading for Difference', shifts the focus to literature (writings not usually regarded as sacred texts). Following Elaine Showalter's definition (1986), Llewellyn conceptualises the relationship between feminist theologians and literature as 'gynocritical reading patterns' (2015: 91). The author compares this to women's spiritual reading of literature. She considers third wave women's spirituality emerging in the concern for validating individual spiritualities, and in a shared reading 'for difference' (2015: 90). The latter is regarded as a departure from feminist theologians' gynocriticism.

Chapter 5, 'Reading for Community', considers reading as an experience of both individuality *and* community, and it investigates women's reading as a spiritual practice to fulfil a desire for community. Llewellyn argues that individuality and community meet in two ways: first, in the physical and spatial communities formed with other readers via 'acts of recommendation and

discussion' (2015: 116); and second, in the fostering of 'intimate communities': through connections with the text and author, as well as 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1991). The 'imagined communities' are the communities women conceptualise through reading by imagining a collective of women similarly pursuing a spiritual journey. As Llewellyn puts it, the construction of communities through women's spiritual reading are 'third wave sites' (2015: 116), where women's contemporary religion emerges.

To conclude, *Reading, Feminism, and Spirituality: Troubling the Waves* engages with various academic disciplines, discourses (feminist theology and religious studies, and third wave approaches emerging across the humanities and the social sciences) and methodologies (critical study of academic discourses, as well as qualitative research). In order to study contemporary women's spiritual reading practices, Llewellyn sets up an innovative reader-centred research approach. Her study therefore contributes both to theoretical/conceptual discussions, as well as empirical research findings.

Some points of discussion remain. First, theoretically, the critical-affirmative approach towards the wave metaphor enables the author to reclaim the third wave from the perspective of women's spirituality. This approach has its merits as it results in a 'widening the outlook' (2015: 162) of third wave feminism (and potentially fourth wave feminism) by including women's religious/spiritual experiences. However, existing in-depth critique on the wave metaphor raises the question whether it is relevant to stick to the wave metaphor. This tension between the deconstructive and affirmative approach of the book is hinted at, but not really resolved.

A second important theoretical concern is the oppositional set up between feminist scholars in theology and religious studies on the one hand, and secular gender studies on the other. The author does not address the cross-disciplinary feminist study of women in Islam, which has a long (post/colonial) tradition in Anglo-Saxon and European academia and rose to importance in the 9/11-era, finding expression in discussions about women's agency and the role of religion in Western public spheres. The thesis of a secular/sacred disciplinary distinction might be true for the study of women in Christianity and Judaism. However, including the study of Islam and Muslim women in genealogies of feminist theology/religious studies and secular gender studies would provide another picture that makes an easy opposition of religious-secular untenable.

Llewellyn's study generates important new insights into the ways in which women of different ages, and various social and Christian and post-Christian backgrounds forge spiritual lives. The women who participated in Llewellyn's study construct their spirituality through reading sacred and non-sacred literature. On the basis of specific reading strategies, they imagine spiritual selves and communities. The book is therefore an important reading for all those situated in the interdisciplinary field of the study of women, feminism and contemporary forms of religion and spirituality.