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# Gender and Power in Contemporary Spirituality

Ethnographic Approaches

Edited by  
Anna Fedele and Kim E. Knibbe



# Gender and Power in Contemporary Spirituality

Contemporary spiritual practitioners tend to present their own spirituality as non-hierarchical and gender equal, in contrast to 'established' religions. Current studies of these movements often reproduce their self-description as empowering, while other literature reacts polemically against these movements, describing them as narcissist and irrelevant and/or in league with capitalism. This book moves between these two poles, recognizing that gender and power are always at work in any sociocultural situation. What strategies do people within these networks use to attain gender equality and gendered empowerment? How do they try to protect and develop individual freedom? How do gender and power nevertheless play a role? The contributions collected in this book demonstrate that in order to understand contemporary spirituality the analytical lenses of gender and power are essential. Furthermore, they show that it is not possible to make a clear distinction between established religions and contemporary spirituality: the two sometimes overlap, at other times spirituality uses religion to play off against while reproducing some of the underlying interpretative frameworks. While recognizing the reflexivity of spiritual practitioners and the reciprocal relationship between spirituality and disciplines such as anthropology, the authors do not take the discourses of spiritual practitioners for granted. Their ethnographic descriptions of lived spirituality span a wide range of countries, from Portugal, Italy and the Netherlands to Mexico and Israel.

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Contemporary Spirituality**  
Ethnographic Approaches  
*Edited by Anna Fedele and Kim E.  
Knibbe*

# **Gender and Power in Contemporary Spirituality**

Ethnographic Approaches

**Edited by Anna Fedele and  
Kim E. Knibbe**

First published 2013  
by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Simultaneously published in the UK  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group,  
an informa business*

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*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Gender and power in contemporary spirituality : ethnographic approaches /  
edited by Anna Fedele and Kim E. Knibbe.

p. cm. — (Routledge studies in religion ; 26)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Sex role—Religious aspects. 2. Power (Social sciences)
  3. Spirituality. 4. Spiritual life. 5. Religions. 6. Religion.
- I. Fedele, Anna. II. Knibbe, Kim E.

BL65.S4G45 2012

200.81—dc23

2012031657

ISBN: 978-0-415-65947-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-203-07465-7 (ebk)

Typeset in Sabon  
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

*To our daughters, who were born while this book was being prepared.*

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# Acknowledgments

During the preparation of this edited volume we received useful feedback from many colleagues, whom we would like to thank: Ellen Badone, Diana Espirito Santo, Cyril Isnart, Sabina Magliocco, José Mapril, David Picard, Sofia Sampaio, Clara Saraiva, Ramon Sarrò, Valerio Simoni, Kocku von Stuckrad, Alexandra Grieser and Yme Kuiper.

This book is the outcome of the panel “Spirituality against Religion: The Role of Gender and Power”, which we coordinated at the eleventh biennial conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists held in Maynooth (Ireland) in August 2010. We would like to thank those in the public for their questions and suggestions and those participants whose papers could not be included in this volume for different reasons: Austin Buscher and Frans Jespers.

We are also grateful to the anonymous peer reviewers for their suggestions and to William A. Christian, Sarah Pike and Barbara Boudewijnse for their attentive reading of the introduction.

Laura Vollmer helped us with the editing of the introduction and Laura Stearns at Routledge was always there to help us.

Finally we are also grateful to our partners, Cédric Masse and Andrei Angned, who supported us during the period of preparation of this volume, when both of us were at different times pregnant, on maternity leave and later struggling to combine work and motherhood.

# Introduction

## Gender and Power in Contemporary Spirituality

*Anna Fedele and Kim Knibbe*

Growing up in a Catalan Catholic family, Maria Rosa received a lot of sexual attention from men, causing her father a great deal of anxiety. He was an illegitimate child, and therefore particularly afraid that Maria Rosa would repeat the mistakes of his mother, by 'giving in' to her sexual impulses. Although she was repeatedly abused sexually by a physician, she did not dare to tell her parents, believing that her father would blame her. During her childhood she had 'psychic experiences': she foresaw events and talked to invisible beings. As a teenager, Maria Rosa read books about Buddhism and studied to become a secretary.

After she got married (at nineteen), she continued to be afraid that her sexual power would lead her to betray her husband and 'become a slut'. She worked as a secretary and as a housewife, and had two children with her husband, following the model of her mother as a hardworking woman. Although she did not go to church anymore, she did want her children to be baptized.

Her youngest child, Laura, was born with learning disabilities and she had to stop working. Due to various alternative therapies she came to understand that she had 'chosen' to have a 'problematic' daughter, to make sure that she could not compete for the attention of Oriol, her husband. When her father died, she began to gain weight. She interpreted this as a way of becoming less attractive to other men, decreasing the risk of betraying her husband and 'becoming a slut'. She went from one therapist to another, to find a solution for Laura, and for herself.

Maria Rosa is now a spiritual practitioner herself, with a background in kinesiology, Reiki, cromotherapy and numerology. She creates personal numerological charts on request, based on a person's birth date and complete name and often travels with her husband. Together, they do a section of the Camino de Santiago every year. During a pilgrimage to various shrines related to Saint Mary Magdalene in Southern France taken with two of her female friends, Maria Rosa felt that she was able to heal wounds related to gender and sexuality that belonged to her own life story but also to that of her wider family.

During an organized trip to Jerusalem she made with her husband, Maria Rosa became very upset because she was not allowed into the Holy

Sepulchre. Almost bursting into tears, she was hugged by the tourist guide of the organized group they were travelling with. She felt embraced by “Jesus’ energy”, a clearly “masculine energy” and had what she described as one of her strongest “spiritual experiences”.

## CONFRONTING CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALITY

Like Maria Rosa, since the 1980s an increasing number of people in Europe and Northern America refuse to consider themselves (only) as part of an established religion and develop ‘their own’ spiritual practices. In the past two decades a growing number of individuals in Western society state that they are not ‘religious’ but ‘spiritual’.<sup>1</sup> They embrace loosely organized groups practicing meditation, channeling or Reiki, join workshops about sacred sexuality or shamanic drumming and create altars at their homes with statues of divinities from different religious traditions. Some of them criticize established religion as patriarchal, misogynist and hierarchical and refuse to depend on an external authority, such as a priest, in order to establish contact with the divine, if they even recognize the divine as a separate domain. Spiritual practitioners often describe their experiences in terms of an all-pervading life force they call ‘energy’ and tend to create their own spiritual patchwork, assembling together different theories, techniques and figures.

What do people mean when they call themselves spiritual? Is ‘spirituality’ indeed something that can be distinguished from ‘religion’ on an analytical level? Are the practices developed by contemporary spirituality as empowering as advocates state they are? What role do gender and power have in contemporary spiritual groups claiming to be gender-equal and nonhierarchical? In this volume we address these and also other more specific questions related to contemporary spiritual practices, building upon existing theories. Although the importance of the themes of gender and power has already been noted by scholars, we found that they have been analyzed with little reference to ethnographic evidence, often taking for granted ‘emic’ discourses on gender and power. Furthermore, most studies of contemporary spiritualities refer to theories that draw on data mainly derived from the United States, Canada and/or the United Kingdom.<sup>2</sup> This volume explicitly addresses what happens in other European and American countries. We can thus ask how local specificities influence the forms spirituality takes, as well as how consideration of the findings in these ethnographies may inform theory.

The way in which Maria Rosa came to interpret her life as well as her body, her choice to embrace spirituality without renouncing Catholicism and her trajectory from disciple to teacher show how lived spirituality is a complex phenomenon that needs to be analyzed in ways that go beyond practitioners’ own self-understandings. Her story also clearly illustrates how spirituality can help women come to terms with traumas related to their gender identities and their sexuality.

However, as the chapters in this volume show, the claims of contemporary 'spirituality' to offer (gendered) empowerment and to be free from the 'traditional' gendered hierarchies (in contrast to 'religion') should be approached critically. In a sense, both the phenomenon and the analysis of it are not new. Each age has known its own religious renewals claiming to offer a 'better' more 'pure' religion not corrupted by power, money or the search for status. At the same time, historiography and the social sciences have shown that the desire to go beyond these corrupting influences paradoxically functions as a way of hiding the existent power relationships and domination within contemporary as well as more ancient spiritualities and religious groups (we will elaborate on this further when we discuss the continuities between present-day spiritualities and vernacular religion ahead).

The complexity and slipperiness of spirituality make fieldwork particularly important.<sup>3</sup> Although in some contexts, people identify explicitly as 'spiritual but not religious' and do not want to be associated with any social label, in other contexts, people identify as religious *and* spiritual, finding their own ways beyond the religious tradition in which they were raised. Many spiritual practitioners in traditionally Catholic countries of Southern Europe,<sup>4</sup> but also in the south of the Netherlands,<sup>5</sup> may still be nominally Catholic, baptize their children and marry in a church. Moreover spiritual practitioners are often conscious of common critiques about their kind of religiosity as self-indulgent and consumerist and tend to have a defensive attitude, rejecting the labels attempting to classify them as soon as they emerge (we will return to this issue later). Through participant observation, the recollection of life stories and in-depth open interviews, it is possible to gain an intimate glimpse into the worlds of people who call themselves spiritual.<sup>6</sup>

In order to explore these issues we organized a panel for the eleventh biennial conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists held in Maynooth (Ireland) in August 2010, entitled "Spirituality Against Religion: The Role of Gender and Power". We invited participants to explore the role of gender and power in contemporary spirituality, drawing on their ethnographic data, and inductively develop theoretical insights, without prescribing any theoretical orientation beforehand. The discussions during the panel and various rounds of writing and feedback have led to the chapters of this book. Their authors come from different countries and analyze spiritualities in areas where little ethnographic research on this topic has been done, such as Israel, Southern Europe and Mexico. They also draw on French and German studies of spirituality that has often been neglected in the English literature.

In this book, we will address what the people in our research areas mean when they speak of 'spirituality' and 'religion'. But what do we as academics mean when we speak of spirituality and religion? How do these terms overlap with other terminology, such as 'New Age', 'new religious movements' and contemporary 'Paganism'? The following section summarizes

some of the approaches to these phenomena and the terminology used in the academic literature.

### **SPIRITUALITY AGAINST RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGION, SPIRITUALITY = RELIGION?**

In recent years several authors have spoken of a “turn towards spirituality”<sup>7</sup> or a “spiritual revolution”,<sup>8</sup> positing the thesis that ‘religion’ is gradually giving way to ‘spirituality’. Does the end of religion predicted by the social scientists in the 1970s and 1980s imply not secularization but rather a sort of ‘spiritualization’ of religion? Much of the current literature on spirituality takes the ‘spiritual revolution’ thesis of Heelas and Woodhead as a touchstone to either argue against it, or to throw light on their own data. These authors posit a distinction between religion and spirituality: religion stands for ‘life as’, supports traditional social structures, and usually has at its center a transcendent God. Spirituality, in their perception, is oriented towards subjective life, individual development and a holistic worldview. Authors such as Aupers and Houtman have used similar distinctions to argue that a spiritual revolution is taking place in many other countries.<sup>9</sup> However, as indicated by the case studies examined in this volume, there are some people who prefer to call themselves ‘spiritual’ rather than ‘religious’, but there are also many people who see themselves as spiritual *and* religious. Furthermore, a substantive examination of the ideas espoused by people labeling themselves as spiritual reveals that many of them can just as easily be associated with a ‘transcendent’ as with a holistic worldview, transgressing the distinctions posited by Heelas and Woodhead.

In her study of homebirth in America, Pamela Klassen observed that people made a distinction between religion as an “age-old tradition, encrusted with hierarchy” and spirituality, seen as providing “a more immediate, accessible, personal relationship with God (or another deity)” and that these notions had “a powerful hold over contemporary discourse about religious or spiritual matters”.<sup>10</sup> Like Klassen, we believe that theories about a spiritual revolution should be considered as representative of one kind of discourse about spirituality and religion that exists alongside many others. They rely on a homogenized and simplified image of both ‘spirituality’ and ‘religion’. Talal Asad has argued that the secular can be thought of only in reference to religion;<sup>11</sup> similarly, ‘spirituality’ seems to be inextricably linked to ‘religion’.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, as van der Veer argues, the spiritual and the secular “are produced simultaneously as two connected alternatives to institutionalized religion in Euro-American modernity”.<sup>13</sup>

On an analytical level, what is now called spirituality could be seen as an instance of what has previously been called ‘folk religion’, ‘popular religion’ or ‘lived religion’.<sup>14</sup> One of the important contributions of anthropologists to the study of religion has been to show that the lived religion of people is very

different from the orthodox religion described in sacred texts or by representatives of religious institutions.<sup>15</sup> We cannot assume that throughout history religious traditions have been fixed and coherent and that only in recent times they have ceased to be so, as both the 'spiritual revolution' thesis and the secularization-thesis seem to do. For example, the historical analysis of Christianity<sup>16</sup> has shown the dynamic nature of lived religion and the way in which lay people have manipulated dogmas and created their own way of relating to divine forces. The continuity between 'folk religious' practices and other types of spiritualities also becomes visible in the contribution by Roussou on the spirituality of Greek women in chapter 2 of this volume. Similarly, whereas certain French sociologists see a 'new' kind of bricolage,<sup>17</sup> religious historians and anthropologists show that this bricolage in fact has occurred and continues to occur in many different times and places.<sup>18</sup> This emphasis on continuity does not mean that we do not recognize that there may be something new in contemporary spirituality (see ahead for an analysis of innovative aspects); we just want to point out that there seem to be many more commonalities between contemporary lived spirituality and vernacular religion than some social scientists and spiritual practitioners seem willing to admit.<sup>19</sup>

As in vernacular religion, in contemporary spirituality gender (and power) relations are complex, entangled with their social context and cannot be reduced to a dualistic model of female dominating or female empowering.<sup>20</sup> Anthropologists have shown that male dominated religious traditions that may seem to the superficial observer only to subjugate women may in fact offer them empowering alternatives in their social contexts.<sup>21</sup> Others have argued that women manipulate the rules and roles established by religious institutions in order to gain charisma and power. Similarly, in this volume we argue that contemporary spiritualities that apparently challenge existing religious gender roles do so in multiple ways and need to be studied bearing in mind the social context in which they originate. They can empower women, offering new roles and figures of reference, but they can also end up reproducing gender stereotypes or gendered domination or even lead to cases of abuse, as Werczberger illustrates in her contribution to this volume.<sup>22</sup>

As Courtney Bender has shown in a recent ethnography, the practices and ideas that many people who call themselves 'spiritual but not religious' draw on have a long history (she refers to them as 'new metaphysicals') even though these practitioners are not concerned at all with this history. Other religious scholars focusing on the United States have traced back the continuity of certain spiritual theories and practices to the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>23</sup> Astrology, Tarot, magnetism and channeling, among others, are all part of a long lineage of practices that are studied within the newly emerged field of the study of esotericism.<sup>24</sup> This field struggles with similar difficulties of definition. As von Stuckrad argues, it would be a mistake to view 'Western esotericism', and by extension present-day 'spirituality' drawing on esoteric ideas and practices, as an identifiable tradition or system of thought. Rather, he speaks of 'esoteric discourses' in Western culture as a body of



discursive operations that includes the academic study of esotericism and religion. This means that the narratives both of marginalization of esoteric traditions and of ‘secret knowledge’ are studied as part of the genealogies of identities within a European historic context that is much more pluralistic than is often posited.<sup>25</sup> Esotericism, and by extension, present-day ‘spirituality’, should therefore be analyzed in relation to the social and cultural fields in which it attempts to claim and occupy a certain position (which, in many cases, is a field dominated by the concept of religion).

Popp-Baier offers an overview of the ways in which the distinction between religion and spirituality has been made. She shows, using the same European Value Survey Data that other scholars have used to argue for a spiritual turn, that these data can also be analyzed in a way that yields a much more complex pattern.<sup>26</sup> Ultimately, she advises “against including the concept of spirituality in our analytical terminology in order to describe or interpret religious change”. She points out “the variety of emic meanings of this concept” and “the serious flaws the different etic concepts of spirituality have” and proposes to connect the debate about contemporary religious change “with historical investigations, ‘territorial’ contextualization, and theoretical clarifications”.<sup>27</sup> In line with these arguments, we believe that ‘spirituality’ or ‘religion’ can be understood only within the social and cultural configurations and historical trajectories in which such self-identifications occur. As the chapters in this volume show, different ethnographic contexts have different configurations of the spiritual vis-à-vis the religious.

Nevertheless there seem to be some common traits that, local specificities notwithstanding, tend to emerge. These common traits have to do with the oppositions used in describing oneself as ‘spiritual’ in relation (or opposition) to ‘religion’. The following series of distinctions emerge quite often:

Religion—spirituality

Fixed—flexible

Authority—absence of authority

Gender inequality—gender equality

Hierarchy—nonhierarchical structure

Status-oriented—inner development-oriented

Mediated access to divinity—unmediated access to divinity

Body/sexuality hostile—body/sexuality friendly

Although not all these distinctions may be operative across all contexts, it is clear that spirituality is assumed to act critically on the presumed ‘negative’ traits of religion. Issues of power and gender seem to play a crucial role in this process of construction by opposition. Even if spiritual practitioners say that they contest all established religion, the kind of ‘religion’ they oppose seems to be mainly related to the Jewish-Christian heritage of

Western society.<sup>28</sup> One might wonder, and we will analyze this point in more detail later (see the section on gender), if through this process of construction by opposition spiritual practitioners do not end up reproducing certain concepts that they had set out to criticize.

Previously, we have highlighted the continuity between contemporary spirituality and vernacular religion. This does not mean that there is nothing 'new' to observe in contemporary spirituality or that these innovations do not challenge aspects of the social and religious order. From the chapters in this volume it emerges that different forms of spirituality offer practitioners new theories and ritual practices that allow them to come to terms with the challenges of current sociocultural and economic contexts, which are often globalized and mostly urban. Furthermore, the networks of spiritual practitioners themselves are increasingly globalized, sometimes forming transnational social fields. Another important innovative element that emerges from the chapters of this volume is ritual creativity: spiritual practitioners claim their right to ritualize, to create new rites instead of stereotypically repeating traditional ones. They invoke divinities, use gestures and combine symbols borrowed from different religious traditions but also create new ones that represent current situations and problems. In this context the authority of contemporary crafted rituals no longer derives from being part of a shared tradition, but from the fact that they are experienced by participants as something that works.<sup>29</sup> Another recurrent feature is the self-conscious approach of spiritual practitioners and their use of social and psychological theories to create and justify their worldview, as well as to create their rituals.

In conclusion, we take the distinction religion/spirituality to be a topic of research in much the same way that Asad sees the categories of 'religion/secularity' not as universal and analytical categories, but as the outcome of a historical process of cultural dynamics, and therefore a topic of research to be studied. Where he pleads for an 'anthropology of the secular' to complement the focus on 'religion', we plead for an anthropology of 'the spiritual' as a category that in recent years has emerged as a significant 'other' of the category of religion. In this way, new questions arise: how is this distinction used in different contexts? Is spirituality to some people a religion without power?

## Notes on Terminology

How then do these considerations relate to other, partly overlapping terms such as 'New Age', 'New Religious Movements', 'spiritualities of life' and 'esotericism'? Since the 1980s there has been a growing literature about new religious movements (NRMs),<sup>30</sup> the New Age movement<sup>31</sup> and more recently spirituality.<sup>32</sup> All these terms have been used as umbrellas to describe a range of more or less organized groups and movements as well as the personal trajectories of individuals unrelated to groups. Some of these groups

would agree and even be eager to be identified as a well-recognized and established 'religious movement' or 'church' (e.g., Seventh-Day Adventists), whereas others do not consider themselves to be part of an established religious group and, as we have seen, reject the term 'religious'. The contributors to this volume refer to social actors and groups that find 'religion' a problematic term and feel more at ease with the term 'spirituality'. They analyze cases that help to shed light on the complex entanglements of spirituality and religion, but generally do not see these terms as indicating distinct phenomena.

We try to avoid the use of the term 'New Age' because, as several other scholars have noted<sup>33</sup> even if it was used in the 1980s and 1990s,<sup>34</sup> spiritual practitioners now usually distance themselves from this term. Aware of the accusations of self-indulgency, narcissism and consumerism directed at New Agers, social actors seem to have incorporated these criticisms into their own discourses. They state that New Agers are self-absorbed consumers<sup>35</sup> but that they themselves are not New Age. However, we do not go as far as Matthew Wood to say that "no case has been convincingly made that an area of religious belief and practice that can be described as New Age exists".<sup>36</sup> As Sutcliffe and Bowman observed,<sup>37</sup> New Age has now become a mainstream term used to refer to a certain kind of music and other cultural products and may be used to refer now to a wider cultural phenomenon rather than a specific religious reality.

Some scholars have argued that the term 'New Age' has been substituted by 'spirituality'.<sup>38</sup> In our view, this may be the case, but at the same time the term spirituality has a wider application. New Age and spirituality cannot be considered to be synonyms. It can be said that New Age has in some way been subsumed into spirituality, but the term 'spirituality' has always been used alongside 'New Age' to describe an area of beliefs and practices that is wider and less specific than 'New Age'.<sup>39</sup> Moreover certain groups who form part of the kind of spirituality we analyze, such as contemporary Pagans, never identified with the New Age movement to begin with.<sup>40</sup>

We chose to use the term 'spirituality' because it is widely used and currently perceived as positive by the social actors we want to describe. The chapters in this volume show that there are important differences between spiritual groups and between the practitioners within the same group. Even if they all may refer to common concepts such as that of 'energy' or 'consciousness', this does not mean that their opinions coincide in other aspects.

We refer to the social actors we describe as 'spiritual practitioners' because we want to emphasize the importance that practice has in contemporary spirituality. Both of us found that when asked about their beliefs or about why they believed in the efficacy of this technique or that meta-empirical being, her informants often answered that they did not "believe"—they had experienced its efficacy in their everyday practices.<sup>41</sup> Spiritual leaders often encourage their audience to try things out themselves and see what happens (see, for instance, Cornejo in this volume).

## GENDER

Most so-called 'new religious movements' were created to challenge established religions as well as secular society, and many of them emerged during the period of the upsurge of the feminist movement. Nevertheless scholars focusing on new religious movements created in the last half of the twentieth century do not agree whether these movements really do offer women alternatives that empower them.<sup>42</sup> Often the theoretical gender equality of these movements is not enacted in everyday life.<sup>43</sup>

The loosely organized movements that started appearing in the 1980s such as the so-called 'New Age' or feminist spirituality movements also criticize existing concepts of gender and tend to consider what they identify as 'religion' as one of the main opponents on humanity's way towards gender equality. Most scholars agree that the New Age and the contemporary Pagan movements tend to have little hierarchical organization.<sup>44</sup> They offer women possibilities of empowerment and provide both men and women with alternative gender models and roles.<sup>45</sup> Women represent the majority of those attending (like in many other religious groups), as well as in the leadership of contemporary spiritual groups.<sup>46</sup> Several ethnographies on Pagan groups in the United Kingdom and the United States have shown how they offer women (and some men) alternatives to conceptualize their bodies as well as their places in society.<sup>47</sup>

The emphasis on gender equality and critique of gender roles of established religious traditions has characterized many emerging religious groups in the past. If we consider the case of Christianity, for instance, we can see that early Christian groups attracted many women because they gave them more rights than the dominant religions of the time.<sup>48</sup> Also Christian groups later labeled as heretics, such as the Cathars, offered more privileges to women and criticized the orthodox Christianity of their time with arguments that are not so different from those of certain contemporary spiritual groups. In fact spiritual practitioners often describe Christian movements such as the Cathars or the Rosicrucians as their forerunners on the quest for gender equality, and furthermore these movements are used as historical authorities of contemporary spiritual theories.<sup>49</sup>

Analyzing the 'emic' attributes of spirituality and religion listed earlier, we have seen that spirituality is perceived as gender-equal and having a more relaxed attitude towards the body (especially the female body) as well as towards sexuality. Spiritual practitioners describe the physical body as inhabited by divine forces (often referred to as 'energy') and condemn the Judeo-Christian opposition of body and soul as the ideological ground that fostered the domination of women and nature.<sup>50</sup> Even if all exponents of contemporary spirituality do not share the same attitudes towards body and sexuality as the Pagan-influenced women described by Hegner and Trulsson in this volume, it can be said that the conceptualization and celebration of the body (and especially the female body) as sacred are important features of contemporary spirituality.

As Brown observes in his ethnography, among channelers in the United States the common trend is to bring back together concepts that have been made into dichotomies within Western civilization and emphasize the part that has been downplayed. So there is a focus on body rather than soul, female rather than male, intuition rather than reason.<sup>51</sup> But the emphasis on what is identified as 'female' implies the acceptance of an extremely polarized and often stereotypical conceptualization of feminine and masculine.<sup>52</sup> If the male is rational, goal-oriented and giving, the female is intuitive, emotional and receptive;<sup>53</sup> very often these characteristics are considered as being naturally given rather than culturally constructed.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless spiritual practitioners do not want to express a sort of ideal and complete male or femaleness; they aim to express both their 'feminine' and 'masculine side'. Following a popularized version of the principles of *animus* and *anima* derived from Jungian psychology, men often find that through spirituality they can find access to their feminine side.<sup>55</sup> For women this process tends to be twofold. Some observe that through spiritual practices they can contact aspects of their feminine side they have learned to reject, growing up as aggressive women who have to overachieve in work to be considered as good as men.<sup>56</sup> Others explain how they learn to contact their male part and start taking charge of their lives and lead a life that is more self-oriented.<sup>57</sup>

Gender critique is often one of the reasons that lead men as well as women to abandon the religious tradition they had inherited from their parents.<sup>58</sup> These movements offer women new ways to conceptualize their body and find a more positive access to bodily processes such as menstruation, childbirth, breastfeeding or menopause.<sup>59</sup> Spiritual practitioners openly criticize established religions, especially Christianity, and the negative stereotypes they associate with the female body through key female figures like Eve, who is considered responsible for the fall of mankind. Instead of rejecting Christian figures and concepts, their meaning is often inverted and given a positive meaning related to corporeality.<sup>60</sup> This is the case with the "Stations of the Vulva" (instead of the cross) described by Trulsson in this volume or the "Black Madonna" opposing her "white" and immaculate equivalent (see Fedele in this volume). A similar process of inversion also happens with fairytales in which traditional figures such as Little Red Riding Hood or the Sleeping Beauty are transformed into empowered female figures by authors such as Barbara Walker.<sup>61</sup>

These inversions, and the way they use dichotomies and essentialized notions of femininity and masculinity, raise the question of whether they do not in some way reproduce some of the so-called 'patriarchal structures' they aim to subvert. Following the dichotomies just mentioned, it seems that the body and sexuality can be only either sinful or sacred: is there room for sex simply for pleasure? Could concepts of sacred sexuality or sacred maternity be perceived as oppressive? Women and men may feel pressure to achieve a spiritually fulfilling orgasm or to have (or help their women to

have) an orgasmic birthing experience and feel inappropriate for not having been able to cope with this ideal.

Focusing mainly on data emerging from the United Kingdom, Woodhead and Sointu argue that spirituality is more attractive to women because it validates traditionally feminine values of caring, but also helps them manage the double (or triple) burden of contemporary femininity: taking care of the material and emotional needs of their families in the private sphere, sometimes also caring for aging parents, and having to work in the public sphere (although usually clustered in the caring professions). In their analysis, contemporary spirituality helps middle-class women to move from selfless caring in their family life, and often also in their caring professions, to expressive selfhood.<sup>62</sup> They argue that contemporary spirituality with its focus on taking care of the self “can have profound moral consequences for individuals located in social roles that deny the legitimacy of self-fulfilment”.<sup>63</sup>

What Luhrmann observed in the late 1980s among middle-class women in London practicing witchcraft still seems to apply thirty years later.<sup>64</sup> Caught within the dilemmas of what Hochschild describes as a “stalled gender revolution”,<sup>65</sup> women in the West live in a society “in which they experience violence, but in which women’s anger is not well tolerated”.<sup>66</sup> The changes related to the shift to a postindustrial context since the 1960s as well as the politics that followed the feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s imposed heavy expectations on middle-class women. They have since often been expected to be competitive career women but also the nurturing primary parents for the children. They lack models of women in the public sphere and are often criticized either as over-caring stay-at-home mothers lacking ambition or as over-competitive and unwomanly careerists.<sup>67</sup> Different ethnographies focusing on Pagan practices have shown how through crafted rituals women can come to terms with the anxiety and anger related to their ambiguous position in Western society as well as with traumas and conflicts left unaddressed by other religious or civil institutions like abortion, sexual abuse or surgery on sexual organs.<sup>68</sup>

In the same article, Woodhead and Sointu criticize social theories labeling spirituality as “narcissistic”<sup>69</sup> or situating “the growth of therapeutic practices within a late modern context that shifts the focus of aspiration from social improvement to inner personal satisfaction”.<sup>70</sup> They wonder why this kind of spirituality tends to be labeled as self-indulgent and “lacking moral horizons” and observe that this may be related to the fact that this kind of spirituality encourages women to question their role as caretakers and find time for their own self-development. In a society that still depends on the caring work performed predominantly by women and that often receives little social acknowledgment and economic retribution, a spirituality that invites women to take care of themselves before taking care of others might be perceived as subversive at least on a symbolic level, as a threat to women’s caring work for others.<sup>71</sup>

We agree that gender is an important element to take into account when understanding the increasing success of spirituality and that, instead

of labeling spiritual practices as narcissist, more attention should be paid (among other things) to the ways in which they challenge or try to challenge gender inequalities. But at the same time we think that the analysis at the level of 'emic' discourses should continue on and inquire in more detail if spiritual practices indeed encourage women and men to change their lives and to what extent these changes may challenge the status quo in terms of gender.

An analysis of gender discourse and practices in contemporary spirituality should also take into account the differences existing on a religious as well as on a gender basis between Europe and the United States, but also within Europe. As the chapters in this volume show, the kind of 'paganish' spirituality that proves attractive for German women in Berlin would probably not be attractive to the Greek women described by Roussou. These Greek women clearly grew up with certain gender stereotypes and practical restrictions regarding access to economic independence and work that Hegner's Berlin-based women do not seem to share.

Paying attention to the particularities of spirituality in different countries might also help to overcome the stereotype of middle-aged, middle-class women with a higher educational background than the majority. As Houtman and Mascini<sup>72</sup> have shown, spirituality can also speak to the younger generations and contemporary forms of Paganism are proving to be increasingly attractive for teenagers and people in their twenties.<sup>73</sup> Doing fieldwork in so-called 'spiritual societies' and 'paranormal markets', Knibbe found that the public at these gatherings was often dominated by lower-class women and men with often only primary school or a few years of secondary school education.<sup>74</sup> During fieldwork about Goddess spirituality in Portugal, Fedele found that, being in her mid-thirties, on several occasions she was among the eldest participants of the group. Also in Spain, where the cost of workshops and spiritual meetings is considerably lower than in other countries such as France or Italy, a significant number of women in their twenties and also working-class women or women living on social security services were involved in spirituality.<sup>75</sup>

Another point where studies of spirituality focusing on gender need refinement is the almost exclusive focus on the centrality of the 'self'. As we have already seen in the previous section of this introduction, the importance attributed to the self is only one among many elements present in spirituality and represents more an 'emic' concept than one that can be used from an analytical point of view. Creating exclusively male or female groups where one can exchange experiences, spiritual practitioners found that they could talk about emotions and problems related to gender left unaddressed by religious and lay institutions.<sup>76</sup> They felt a sense of solidarity that they perceived as opposed to same-gender competition in the private sphere (e.g., two women struggling to get the attention of the same man) or in their professional lives.<sup>77</sup>

To enhance our comprehension of the importance of gender in contemporary spirituality, more research also needs to be done about male involvement.

In her ethnography about the Burning Man festival in Arizona, Lee Gilmore found that there are a considerable number of men involved. In the kind of “dark green spirituality” described by Bron Taylor, men also play an important role.<sup>78</sup> Men’s spiritual movements, such as that created by Robert Bly,<sup>79</sup> have received little attention so far and also other forms of spirituality inherent in male self-help groups such as AA (see Sharp’s contribution in this volume) should be taken into account.

Contemporary spiritualities attract gays and lesbians because they tend not to prescribe any sexual orientation. Especially Pagan groups in the United States seem to be quite open to homosexuals and some of them openly address issues related to LGBT issues.<sup>80</sup> Nevertheless ideas about gays and lesbians being “spiritually imbalanced” also circulate within certain networks of spiritual practitioners.<sup>81</sup> Among channelers, for instance, androgyny is perceived as a status fostering transcendence and spiritual elevation.<sup>82</sup> Lesbian or gay Pagan covens also represent an area of research as yet unexplored.

Summarizing, it seems that gender plays a role in several ways: in the ways spirituality positions itself as a gender-equal alternative to ‘traditional religion’, in the ‘healing’ it offers (especially to women) for the wounds inflicted by an oppressive society, and in the creation of and the experimentation with new models of femininity and masculinity. The task of scholars as we see it is not only to analyze these self-descriptions, but also to question how these projects in turn constitute processes of gender and power that may be different from those originally envisaged by practitioners themselves. This brings us to the second major theme of this volume: power.

## POWER

Within the social sciences, in anthropology as well as in sociology and political science, the topic of religion and power is not new.<sup>83</sup> Yet, although power is frequently a subject of discussion among people who call themselves spiritual, in the ethnographic literature on contemporary spirituality it is rarely thematized from an analytical point of view. Nevertheless, it is possible to distinguish two perspectives on power in the ways spirituality is described and analyzed. On the one hand there is the perspective exemplified by Heelas in his various publications. According to Heelas, the move from ‘religion’ (relying on external authorities) to ‘spirituality’ (relying on a ‘sacralized self’) is empowering and enables social actors to resist dominating structures.<sup>84</sup> This approach relies on Charles Taylor’s assertion that there is a “massive subjective turn”<sup>85</sup> taking place in present-day societies. ‘Power’ is thematized only in terms of the *empowerment* that seekers wish to develop through engaging with New Age/spiritual practices.

Wood has criticized this approach quite forcefully: “scholars slip from asserting that self-authority is emphasized in New Age discourses to asserting



that the exercise of self authority marks the New Age".<sup>86</sup> In this way the self and authority are not further analyzed and sociological analyses addressing the constitution of the self through social contexts and the authority issues related to this process are ignored. Wood invites researchers to "go back to fundamental issues of social power and build up a more socially contextualized and plausible theory for understanding the self and authority".<sup>87</sup>

Similarly Hammer has pointed out that 'emic' self-perceptions of New Age/spirituality as individualistic and antihierarchical are too simplistic and need to be elaborated by a sociological, anthropological understanding of the social nature of New Age. He argues: "a hierarchical organization with a strong tendency to enforce a certain discourse in a top-down fashion is easily recognized as such, and can be resisted". In contrast, "an apparently amorphous general opinion, friendly voices that affirm that we should trust our own experience and accept only what rings true to our own intuition, and which goes hand in hand with presumably hardwired cognitive processes, are much less readily identified as loci of external authority".<sup>88</sup>

Another body of literature takes the dimension of power as a starting point for the analysis of spirituality/New Age, departing from a Marxist/Foucauldian perspective. Authors such as Carrette and King see contemporary forms of spirituality as the way in which people are duped by capitalism.<sup>89</sup> Their joint publication aims to reveal how religion is now being "sold" as spirituality to benefit "big business". Their aim is to "explore how spirituality can be reclaimed [from this corporate high-jack] as a means of resistance against capitalism and its deceptions".<sup>90</sup> In this view, spiritual practitioners appear as pawns in the hands of their spiritual teachers, even while describing themselves as empowered human beings that follow the whispers of their innermost self. If in the approach exemplified by Heelas the discourse of spiritual practitioners tends to be overemphasized, it is clear that in this second approach the 'emic' perspective receives little attention and social actors seem to have no voice.

A middle position is taken up by scholars focusing on spirituality's entrance into the workplace. They have paid more attention to the "dark side" of spirituality.<sup>91</sup> In this literature, attention is drawn to workplace spirituality as a technique of "pastoral power" in the Foucauldian sense, harnessing people's spirituality in the interest of the efficacy and productivity of the organization. We might then ask how these 'micro-technologies' of the self offered by contemporary spirituality act outside the workplace. Do spiritual practices in the leisure spaces create a greater 'governmentality' of subjects (as Carrette and King among others seem to suggest)? Or do they indeed enable people to act in ways that resolve the tensions and contradictions of their individual situations, as suggested by Sointu and Woodhead?<sup>92</sup> There is a similar debate on the role of Pentecostalism and evangelicalism: on the one hand, these overlapping religious networks seem to create a habitus that fits very well within a neoliberal world order.<sup>93</sup> On the other hand, a paradigm has emerged<sup>94</sup> that analyzes the religious vitality of sub-