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IN **TRAVAIL, GENRE ET SOCIÉTÉS** 2012/1 No 27 , PAGES 33 TO 54

PUBLISHER **LA DÉCOUVERTE**

ISSN 1294-6303

ISBN 9782707173201

DOI 10.3917/tgs.027.0033

Uploaded: 03/11/2012

Article available online at

<https://shs.cairn.info/journal-travail-genre-et-societes-2012-1-page-33?lang=en>



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GENDER DIFFERENCES IN RELIGIOUS PRACTICE AND SIGNIFICANCE

Linda Woodhead

For reasons which merit separate analysis, the Sociology of Religion has lagged behind many other fields in taking gender seriously. Whilst small-scale, ethnographic studies have been most likely to recognise the significance of gender, dominant theoretical frameworks within the Sociology of Religion often remain gender-blind. Although there has been some debate about why women, in the West at least, are more religious than men,¹ this has largely taken place in isolation from what are still considered to be the 'big' issues in the sociological analysis of religion, most notably issues concerning the growth and decline of religion in modern societies.

This inattention to gender contrasts with the liveliness of gender studies within the academy in recent decades. As I will illustrate in this article, there have been a number of significant sociological contributions to the study of religion and gender in recent decades, which have nevertheless failed to make a

¹ The evidence for women's greater religious commitment is now extensive, and is summarised in Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi (1975), Francis (1997) and Walter and Davie (1998). Most of this evidence concerns women's involvement in Christianity. There is also growing evidence of women's disproportionate involvement in new forms of spirituality in the West (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005; Houtman and Aupers, 2006). Some debate has centred around Rodney Stark's argument that this can be explained by women's greater risk-aversion, whilst others have explored relations between gender orientation and being religious (e.g. Thompson and Remmes, 2002).

² The one writer in the broad area of religious studies who has been, and still is, regularly cited in gender studies – albeit these days often as an example of ‘essentialist’ reductionism – is Mary Daly. Despite her wide-ranging critique of the world’s religions in books like *Gyn/Ecology* (1979) she does not claim to be engaged in the sociological study of religion.

significant impact upon the wider field of gender studies.² Even within the Sociology of Religion itself, those who engage with gender issues have failed to convince many of their colleagues that such a move is not an optional extra or an interesting specialisation, but an essential corrective to the gender-blindness which has, until now, restricted the discipline’s field of vision. The argument still has to be won that removal of these blinkers has consequences for the entire discipline – its methods, its theories, its critical tools and concepts, its focus, its areas of concentration, its specialisations, its hierarchies, its institutional forms and material practices.

One consequence of this patchy and partial interaction is that there is as yet no agreed ‘syllabus’ in the sociological study of religion and gender, no tried and tested way of approaching the subject, no theory or theories of religion and gender. Of necessity then, this article cannot simply summarise the ‘state of the art’ and suggest how it can or should develop in the future – it must also try to fill in some of the gaps. It will approach this task, first, by sketching a theoretical framework for understanding religion and gender, and then by substantiating the theory by reference to some key studies of aspects of religion and gender. Next, the significance of gender for the sociological study of religion will be illustrated in relation to classic theories of secularization. The article will end with a brief sketch of additional areas in which attention to gender has the potential to disrupt and reform agendas in the sociological study of religion.

STARTING POINTS FOR A THEORY OF GENDER AND RELIGION

A theoretical account of the relations between religion and gender requires an acknowledgement that both serve to represent, embody and distribute power within society, plus an account of how these two systems of distribution may relate to one another.

If gender is a complex and interlocking set of power relations constituted in the historical process (Bourdieu, 2001), then it is possible to speak of the ‘gender order’ of a society, despite the impossibility of ever disentangling the full complexities of this order. Religion not only takes its place within this order, it is a constitutive part of it, though it may play a range of different roles and occupy a number of different positions.

Religion’s constitutive contribution to power relations within society is best understood by viewing religion itself as a system of power. As I have argued in relation to Christianity (Woodhead, 2004), religion is the social expression of engagement with a source of power which is unique to religion (‘sacred power’), but religion also involves interaction with ‘secular’ sources of power, both social (cultural, political, economic, military) and

socio-personal (emotional, physical, intellectual, aesthetic). Although it can have independent force, the potency of sacred power is enhanced through alignment with secular power (e.g. there is a close historical relationship between the power of the Christian God and the wealth and political influence of the church, or between the success of 'holistic' therapies and their ability to enhance emotional wellbeing). There are many possible permutations of sacred and secular power, many different ways in which they can reinforce or repudiate one another. To view religion simply as a benign 'sacred canopy' over society (Berger, 1967) is to ignore the ways in which religion(s) can and do play active roles in: reinforcing and legitimating dominant power interests; generating resistance to dominant power; resourcing groups with little social power; resourcing reconfigurations of power. A group which has a great deal of social power may call on sacred power to enhance, extend, legitimate and normalise that power (for example, the Frankish dynasty in medieval Europe, or George W. Bush's Republican Party in the USA). Conversely, a group which has little social power can draw on sacred power to improve its access to secular power in a way which would not otherwise be possible (for example, early Christian communities in the second and third centuries, women-dominated holistic self-spiritualities today, see Heelas and Woodhead, 2005).

THEORISING RELIGION AND GENDER

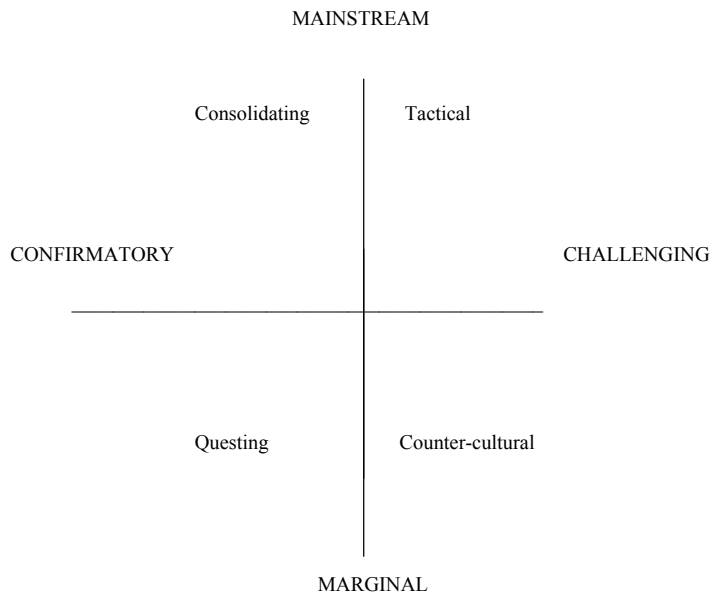
Once power is highlighted, it is easy to see how religion and gender can and do interact. By way of symbolic and material practices religion can reinforce existing gendered distributions of power or try to change them. At any one time a religion will exist in a particular structural relation to the gender order of the society of which it is part. But the existing relationship is only a snapshot in an on-going dynamic that is shaped by many factors, including the religion's own gender strategy. Given that gendered distributions of power are integral to the wider inequalities of social power which define all known societies, this gives us two main variables to consider. One, the way in which religion is situated in relation to existing distributions of secular power: religion's *situation* in relation to gender. Two, the way in which religion is mobilized in relation to existing distributions of secular power: religion's *strategy* in relation to gender.

Expressing this diagrammatically, we can draw a vertical axis which runs from 'mainstream' to 'marginal' religion and a horizontal axis which starts with religion as 'confirmatory' and moves to religion as 'challenging'. 'Mainstream' religion is integral to the existing distribution of power in society and socially respectable. 'Marginal' religion sits at more of an angle to the social and gender order, and will therefore be treated as socially deviant by those who accept the dominant distribution of power.

'Confirmatory' religion seeks to legitimate, reinforce, and sacralise the existing distribution of power in society, particularly the existing gender order, whilst 'challenging' religion seeks to ameliorate, resist or change this order. The two axes give us four 'cells', which represent the four main ways in which religion (as a distribution of power) may relate to gender (as a distribution of power) – and hence four main 'types' of religion in relation to gender.

First, religion can be integral to the existing gender order, and can serve to reproduce and legitimate gender inequality for those who practice the religion and those who fall within its penumbra ('consolidating'). Second, religion can be integral to the existing gender order, but can be used to give access to power from 'inside' and use it in ways which may be subversive of the existing gender order ('tactical'). Third, religion may be marginal to the existing gendered distribution of power, but used as a means of access to that power from the outside, without necessarily intending to disrupt the distribution of that power ('questing'). Finally, religion may be situated in a marginal relation to the gendered distribution of power, and may be used to try to contest, disrupt and redistribute that distribution ('counter-cultural').

Fig. 1: Religion's positioning in relation to gender



This typology does not assume that there is necessarily a static single 'gender order' in a society, for the unit of analysis may vary from a nation-state to a region or ethnic group. It is, however, assumed that within such a unit there will at any one time be a prevailing distribution of power between genders which can be labelled 'mainstream', and alternatives to it which are currently

'marginal'. In most known societies the mainstream distribution has been one which has favoured men over women. However, the nature of that unequal distribution varies considerably over time and place, and in some societies – as, for example, in many contemporary western societies – gender relations may be in a state of considerable flux, such that mainstream position(s) are relatively precarious. Neither does this typology assume that there is necessarily a dominant religious order within a society, or that all members of a religion will assume identical positions in relation to gender. Thus, for example, within a single Christian congregation or denomination the religious activities of some members may 'consolidate' the existing gender order (those who do not question the 'sanctified' version of masculine domination which is presented in official church teachings, institutional arrangements and liturgical practice, for example), whilst the religious activities of others may fall into the 'tactical' category (for example, women who ignore a good deal of official church teaching, create groups in church for women's mutual support, and use these groups to claim both sacred and political power, see Winter, Lummis and Stokes, 1995), whilst still others may be 'questing' (for example, those who use churches sporadically, and sometimes enter them simply to enjoy the sacred space and use it for their own personal and spiritual purposes which do not, however, disrupt the status quo).

This typology directs attention not only to gender orders in society, but also to the gender order(s) inherent in a religion or religious group. Religion's implications in a gendered distribution of power cannot simply be read off from its cultural symbols, important though these are. Even representations of the sacred do not necessarily have a one-to-one relationship with gender order. We can think of such representations as running along a spectrum of possibilities, from those which identify sacred power with a supernatural being or beings and their authorised representatives ('priests') on the one hand, to those which identify the sacred with life itself, and thus with the inner 'spiritual' core of each and every living being on the other (Woodhead and Heelas, 2000). In the former 'religions of difference', sacred power is tightly concentrated and controlled, whereas in the latter 'spiritualities of life' it is more diffuse and accessible. Clearly the former has a natural affinity with forms of social and religious organisation in which power is hierarchically distributed, with the few ruling over the many, whilst the latter has a closer fit with flatter, more egalitarian distributions of power. Given the pervasive social norm of male dominance, it is not surprising to find that religions of difference – particularly monotheistic ones – tend to identify concentrated sacred power with masculinity. Thus in the case of a hierarchical, male-dominated society, we might expect to find a hierarchical, monotheistic religion which sacralises male power, in a 'consolidating' relationship with the prevailing gender order. Likewise, we

might expect a 'counter-cultural' religion which opposes masculine domination to reject a male deity in favour of a female deity, polytheism, pantheism, or a more amorphous mysticism – all of which bring sacred power into closer relation with women. As a number of the studies reviewed below indicate, however, relationships between representation and social enactment should be explored rather than assumed, for in practice a range of possible and sometimes surprising relationships are possible.

STUDIES OF RELIGION AND GENDER

Consolidating

Religion's central role in consolidating gender difference and inequality was recognised, explored and critiqued by nineteenth-century feminists like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her revising committee in *The Woman's Bible* (1985 [orig. 1895-1898]). This tradition of feminist critique was revived with second-wave feminism and lives on into the present day in the work of influential feminist writers like Mary Daly. Although its focus falls on historic texts rather than present realities, this intellectual trajectory has influenced many later attempts to approach the topic of religion and gender from a more sociological point of view. So too have historical studies of the consolidating relations between religious and gender inequality in a range of contexts: from early Christianity and Judaism (e.g. Kraemer and D'Angelo, 1990; Elm, 1994), through the medieval period (e.g. Bynum, 1987, 1991), to early modern (e.g. Davidoff and Hall, 2002) and industrial society (e.g. Ginzberg, 1990; Brown, 2000; Summers, 2000).

In a more fully sociological mode, the continuing link between religion and gender inequality has been demonstrated on a world scale by Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris' (2003) analysis of the World Values and European Values Surveys carried out between 1995-2001. The study finds that levels of gender equality across different countries are related not only to economic growth and legal-institutional reforms, but to cultural factors – above all, religiosity. Thus cross-sectional differences in support for gender equality vary even between societies at similar levels of development, and depend upon degree of religiosity and the type of religious values. Inglehart and Norris conclude that, 'religion matters, not only for cultural attitudes but for the opportunities and constraints on women's lives, such as the ratio of females to males in educational enrolment, the female adult literacy rate, the use of contraception, and the UNDP Gender-Related Development Index, as well as for opportunities for women in the paid workforce and in parliamentary representation' (2003: 69). This is not, however, a question of religious men simply imposing religious attitudes upon women, for traditional sexual values tend to be shared by both sexes in the same type

of society, and women tend to display higher levels of religiosity than men (greatly in industrial society, somewhat in post-industrial society, less in agrarian society, 2003: 58).

Although intensifying secularization is positively correlated with growing gender equality, religion's continuing ability to consolidate gender inequality remains evident in post industrial societies in the West. If anything, this role seems to have become more prominent in the religious sphere as acceptance of the goal of gender equality becomes more widespread in society as a whole (Woodhead, 2006a). Thus the second half of the twentieth century has seen important moves within Christianity, Judaism and Islam to consolidate identity around a defence of 'traditional' roles for men and women which involve male headship and female domesticity. Although this tendency is evident across the spectrum of religious commitment – from the more moderate to the more traditionalist – in the former it may be a function of standing still whilst cultural and sexual values liberalize, whilst in the latter there is a more active drive to consolidate highly differentiated and unequal gender roles. DeBerg (1990) and Bendroth (1993) convincingly demonstrate that hostility to changing gender roles and the rise of feminism was a central factor in the rise of Christian fundamentalism in the USA, and that consolidation of 'traditional' gender roles is as essential and defining a component of fundamentalism as belief in God and theological ideas (Brasher, 1998: 11).

Sociological studies of 'consolidating' forms of conservative religion have been preoccupied with the issue of why women affiliate with groups which sacralise gender difference and inequality. Lynn Davidman's (1991) study of women affiliating to Orthodox Judaism in the USA suggests that women are attracted because of, rather than in spite of, the traditional gender roles on offer: what attracts women is the way in which such religion offers a clear alternative to the confusing and contradictory roles open to women in late modern society. In particular, the role of wife and mother within a nuclear family appeals, and women in conservative religions are happy to make this their primary identity, rather than being caught in a confusion of domestic and professional roles (even when they continue in paid work). What becomes emblematic for Davidman's women is the (idealised) experience of the warm, close, family gathering around the Shabbat table, with candles, food, mutual love and support (1991: 116-120).

But it is not merely the sacred female role which can prove attractive to women who affiliate with conservative, consolidating forms of religion – so too can the sacred male role. Davidman's data suggests that women are attracted by the whole package of nuclear familial domesticity which is advocated by contemporary forms of Orthodox Judaism, including the idea of a husband who will be a companionate protector-provider and protect women from the dangers posed by family breakdown. This too

can be seen as a reaction against prevailing gender norms, in particular against recent modes of masculinity which de-emphasise paternal responsibility (what Ehrenreich (1983) characterises as the 'flight from commitment'), or which legitimate male violence (Dworkin (1983) explains women's flight to fundamentalism as motivated by a futile desire to seek male protection against male violence). In the context of developing countries in the southern hemisphere Martin (1988) notes that women's attraction to Pentecostal Christianity has much to do with the benefits that accrue to them and their children from a stable household unit with a committed father whose conversion to Christianity also involves conversion from *machismo*. Shifting the register more clearly from the real to the ideal, Clark-King (2004) finds Christianity in the northwest of England providing working-class women with an idealised provider-protector figure in God the Father, and an idealised husband/lover in Jesus Christ.

The ways in which religion and hegemonic masculinities consolidate one another remains relatively ill-explored, with the majority of sociological studies of religion and gender focusing on 'marked' femininity rather than 'unmarked' masculinity. This is beginning to change as masculinity becomes more prominent in gender studies (e.g. Connell, 1995; Kimmel and Messner, 1998), and as the active role of religion in the construction and consolidation of masculinity becomes more evident. Movements like Promise Keepers and events like the Million Man March in the USA have helped provoke scholarly awareness of the importance of conservative Christianity in consolidating certain patriarchal modes of masculinity, most notably a paternalistic role. This is not simply a repristination of a 'traditional' mode of Christian patriarchy, since it gives emphasis to new 'expressive' and relational imperatives which are said to be binding on men as well as women (Williams, 2000), but it is certainly a rallying cry to reclaim a man's divine right to rule over his family and to expect his wife and children to serve and obey him, not least by way of unpaid labour in the household (Eldén, 2002). Such developments take place against a background which has seen a shift from what Walby (1990) calls the 'private patriarchy' which held sway in advanced industrial societies of right through to the 1950s towards a 'public patriarchy' (see below). The former, which operates an exclusionary patriarchal strategy and relies on 'household production as the main site of women's oppression' (1990: 24), has been consolidated historically by religions like Christianity and Judaism. Fundamentalist religion across the globe retains loyalty to private patriarchy in the contemporary context, whilst being willing to make some accommodation to the shift towards a public patriarchy in which women's labour is exploited across a wider range of sites, including the paid workforce. The corresponding shifts and accommodations made by 'mainstream' and more liberal forms of religion remain to be studied.

Tactical

Whereas consolidating forms of religion accept, reinforce and sacralise the dominant gender order – and vice versa – tactical forms work within such orders but push beyond them. In Kandiyoti's (1988) terms, they 'bargain with patriarchy', accepting prevailing patterns of meaning and power-distribution, but maximising their advantage for those who are disadvantaged by them. They can never fatally undermine the prevailing distribution of power, for to do so would be to undermine the source of power to which they seek greater access. Since such a stance is most likely to emerge within a religious group rather than to give rise to a religion as such, it may be more accurate to speak of a tactical trajectory within religion, rather than a tactical type. For obvious reasons, it is those who are disempowered by the prevailing gender order – usually women – who are most likely to be involved in such a trajectory.

Two recent studies of women in conservative Christian congregations and networks in the USA religions reveal the continuing importance of tactical religion. In her research in two conservative mega-churches, Brasher (1998) discovers that their appeal to women – who make up about fifty per cent of the congregations – does not lie primarily in the large weekly Sunday worship service led by male pastors which scholars have traditionally assumed to be the central ritual and social event of congregational life. Rather, women have created what is in many respects a parallel religious association, in which small women-only groups which meet on a regular weekly or more-than-weekly basis form the basic social unit. Such 'female enclaves' (1998: 5) fall under the oversight of women responsible for women's ministry, and have considerable autonomy. Whilst their explicit focus is often around Bible study, their characteristic activities do not resemble 'traditional' Bible studies in which an authorised (male) interpreter offers an intellectual commentary upon the scriptures. Rather, activities and interpretations are shaped by women's own agendas, and often focus on personal and family issues, providing an opportunity for the exploration, expression, healing and disciplining of emotions. Such groups become life-support systems, in which women listen to, care for, and give practical support to one another, almost entirely independent of the formal male-dominated power structures of the church. In addition, women make use of congregational space to set up a wide variety of additional, often very practical, support structures which provide a variety of services including childcare and marital support.

Griffith's (1997) study of the evangelical-charismatic 'Women's Aglow' movement also finds that women simultaneously accept the sanctification of female domesticity and male headship, whilst making use of their parallel female religious organisation to deal with the high costs of their subordination.

Like Brasher she finds women participating in male-approved discourses and activities, but bending these to their own uses. Women worship a perfect husband and lover, Jesus Christ, whilst struggling to improve and cope with the disappointments and high costs of their actual marital and familial duties. They support one another as they cope with problems with their children, spousal infidelity and cruelty, low self-esteem and everyday unhappiness. Like Brasher's parallel female congregational activities, Women's Aglow operates within a territory which is ultimately under male control, but which in practice offers women considerable autonomy, and some positions of quite significant public action and authority for leaders within the movement. It seems no coincidence that both examples arise within evangelical-charismatic territory, since charismatic Christianity loosens the ties between sacred power and ecclesiastical office, and makes sacred power in the guise of 'the Spirit' more widely available – to women as well as men. Nevertheless, such power remains linked to the authority of Father, Son, husband and pastor. As such, it can be appropriated to empower women, but not to overturn the male dominance which it symbolises and supports.

The tactical trajectory within more traditional forms of church Christianity, both Protestant and Catholic, has been less carefully investigated – at least in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. However, a cluster of pioneering studies of women in late nineteenth-century Britain and America demonstrates the importance of tactical religion at the origins of modern feminism. Studies like Welter (1976), Rendall (1985), Banks (1986), Morgan (1999) and Mumm (1999) show that although churches in industrial society played a central role in the consolidation of a rigid gender division and a doctrine of 'separate spheres', religion also provided middle class women with ideological and practical means to combat coercive forms of male power (by reference to scriptural injunctions, and by way of temperance movements), to enter into the civil and public spheres (through charitable, mission and temperance work), and to extend domestic roles, like maternal care, into more public duties. The massive expansion of Catholic female religious orders, often dedicated to a profession such as teaching, nursing or mission, has also been investigated in this light (see, for example, Walsh, 2002). Although the rise of 'secular' feminism and improvements in women's legal, political, and economic status have gradually undermined the basis and necessity of many such tactical developments of western religion, a number of small-scale studies continue to point to ways in which women use mainline church Christianity for purposes often far removed from the intentions and meanings supplied by an official, male-dominated leadership. Thus Ozorak (1996) finds that a reason male dominance of ecclesiastical power-structures does not necessarily deter female involvement is that the

women interviewed do not seek the same benefits from church adherence as men. Whereas the latter often seek institutional office, economic reward and social capital, women are more likely to seek the personal and emotional benefits which derive from the supportive relationships they forge in ecclesiastical contexts.

Clearly tactical religion carves out and flourishes in women-only spaces which gain the protection of male-dominated religion, but escape its immediate supervision. They can never wholly step outside the authority of the religion, however, since their existence is ultimately dependent upon it. An interesting case arises when ecclesiastical authorities actively oppose a tactical trajectory, as the Roman Catholic church has done in relation to its movements for the ordination of women. Although continuing to ally themselves with the same source of sacred power, such movements may gain independent impetus as a result, and sections may splinter off to form counter-cultural religious movements.

Questing

Questing forms of religion begin from a position marginal to the dominant gender order, but use sacred power in ways which aim at personal (or occasionally group) transformation and movement towards a position of greater advantage within the existing gender order. The aim is not to change this order so much as to improve one's position – and wellbeing – within it.

Some forms of questing religion seek worldly benefits for the individual or group, the most striking examples being those which involve the use of magic and spells aimed not solely at achieving an enhanced inner emotional or physical state, but some favourable change in external circumstances. As one would expect, given their power disadvantage, women are more likely to make use of sacred power in this way than men. This is still the case in contemporary western societies where there has been a notable revival and popularisation of magic practices, particularly since the 1980s (Partridge, 2004). Such revival has generally taken the form of a revival of interest in witchcraft which, in its more 'magical' manifestations, is increasingly common amongst teenagers, especially girls (Berger and Ezzy, 2007). Spells, both invented and scripted in popular books, may be directed at attaining power over a love object, though teenagers who become more seriously involved in witchcraft tend to reject such spells as tampering with another's will. They are more likely use spells for practical benefits for self or others, including healing and (in Britain rather than the USA) invisibility! Such aims tacitly accept the dominant gender order, whilst seeking to shift the balance of power within it, or at least allow the actor to maximise her advantage within it. Other forms of Wicca and neo-paganism more generally, especially those practised by adults in

small groups and organised networks, are more likely to fall into the counter-cultural category discussed below.

The most prevalent form of questing religion in late industrial societies is that which became known as 'New Age' in the 1980s, but which has proliferated since then, and is now better referred to as subjective-life spirituality or self-spirituality (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005; Houtman and Aupers, 2006). Such terms point to a central concern with sacralising and enhancing inner life. At one end of the spectrum of such spirituality lie dedicated ritual groups including those which make up the neo-pagan movement (see below), but the forms of self-spirituality most likely to fall into the questing category are those which often describe themselves as 'holistic', by virtue of their concern with 'mind, body and spirit'. Holistic self-spirituality takes a variety of social forms, ranging from individual reading and practice, to one-to-one encounters (such as Reiki, and explicitly spiritual forms of homeopathy and aromatherapy) to group meetings (such as Yoga, Buddhism, Greenspirit), and larger workshops and festivals. It is increasingly incorporated into workplace trainings, nursing and education. Looking at one-to-one and group practices in the UK, Heelas and Woodhead (2005) find that a full 80% of those involved, both as practitioners and clients, are female. Woodhead (2006b) and Houtman and Aupers (2006) offer explanations for this gender imbalance which appeal to the unresolved clash between 'traditional' female roles based around domestic labour and the new, more masculinised roles, which become available to women as they enter the paid workforce in increasing numbers. Self-spiritualities address this condition by encouraging the construction of new modes of selfhood in which identity is not dictated by social position and expectation, but discovered from within. Although this project of selfhood *may* have socially radical implications (see below), it is more likely to render women successful in coping with the contradictions and costs of the unequal distribution of power and unpaid care work in contemporary western societies than in changing in these conditions.

One further interesting example of borderline quest religion concerns the men's mythopoeic movement, which looks to figures like Robert Bly for inspiration (Connell, 1995: 206-211). Although not a straightforwardly religious group, this certainly has elements of a religion. It makes self-conscious use of myth and ritual practices to help men engender new forms of inner strength and identity in which they recover the 'lost masculine'. It can be classified as questing because it is marginal both to the dominant Judaeo-Christian religious order and, at least in its own estimation, to the dominant gender order – since it believes that women's growing social power threatens the position of men.

Counter-cultural

Religion which is counter-cultural with regard to gender is not only marginal to the existing gender order, but actively opposes it and strives to change it and forge alternatives. Here sacred power becomes a central resource in the attempt to establish more equal distributions of power between the sexes.

One of the most influential and most studied contemporary examples of such counter-cultural religion is what is broadly referred to as the goddess feminist movement. In different ways and by different means, those involved with this movement seek to honour the 'divine feminine' in their own lives and in society. Although goddess feminism falls into the broad category of subjective-life spirituality discussed above, and into the narrower sub-category of neo-paganism, it differs from much holistic self-spirituality by virtue of its greater emphasis on ritual practice and the more cohesive communities which develop around such practice, and it qualifies neo-paganism through its concentration on the divine feminine and its commitment to female empowerment. Many goddess feminists are happy to reclaim the title of 'witch', and to describe their religion as 'Wicca'.

The single most influential figure in goddess feminism is the writer, activist and witch Starhawk, whose most influential book remains *The Spiral Dance. A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess* (1979). As Salomonsen (2002) argues, both this eminently practical guide to the living of a divinely-empowered life and its author are best understood in relation to the Reclaiming community of witches in San Francisco, of which Starhawk is a founding member. Salomonsen's study of the Reclaiming witches leaves little doubt about their counter-cultural stance with regard to gender and power. Although there are male members of the movement, women dominate. There is an explicit commitment not merely to gender equality but to female empowerment. 'Traditional' forms of religion and religious organisation are critiqued from a feminist standpoint, and a self-conscious attempt is made to forge new forms of organisation, practice and communal living which provide a new model not only for religion and personal life, but for society. Ritual practice is central to all these aims. It brings the whole Reclaiming community together at certain points of the year for large ritual gatherings, and is central to the life of the autonomous small groups, 'cells', 'circles' or 'covens' of up to fifteen people which form the building blocks of the Reclaiming community. Both rituals and religious commitment are focused not around transcendent forms of masculinity, but either around personal lives and journeys, or around nature and natural cycles. The effect is not to subordinate the female self to an overarching order of male-defined dogma, organisation and divinity, but to empower in relation to others and to (sacred) nature.

Whereas holistic subjective-life spirituality of the questing type is chiefly concerned with inner personal healing and/or transformation, some goddess feminism clearly has, in addition, a more overtly political agenda. Salomonsen distinguishes between 'utopian' and 'generic' witches. For the latter Wicca has personal reference, whereas for the former, including Starhawk, it is 'a religious and social gospel for the transformation of the world' (2002:97). Utopian goddess feminists may make experiments in alternative living, including establishing new eco-communities, and often play an active part in political protest – as in the protests against the siting of a nuclear power plant at Diablo Canyon in California in 1981 which gave rise to the Reclaiming community, or at the Greenham Common airbase in England in 1981-1991, in protest against nuclear weaponry.

GENDERING SECULARIZATION

As the preceding discussion hints, attention to religion's implication in the ordering and disordering of gender relations is capable of yielding new insights about the process of secularization – and 'sacralization' – in modern contexts.

Rather than simply being evacuated from the modern context, religion is relocated. Although still under the ultimate control of a male father God and a male 'religious professionals' (as they increasingly become), religion becomes women's work, closely associated with the domestic sphere. As both literary critics and historians have documented (Douglas, 1977; Welter, 1976; Ginzberg, 1990), Christianity becomes increasingly feminized during the course of the nineteenth century in many north American and European societies, not only in terms of its teachings, imagery and gender ideology, but also in terms of its most active constituency. The much-heralded male crisis of faith in the Victorian era therefore takes place alongside an upsurge of female piety, with the result that the nineteenth century became not the *least* but probably the *most* Christian century of all time, not only in terms of cultural influence but also in terms of churchgoing. Viewed in terms of the theoretical framework offered above, Christianity succeeds both as a consolidating and tactical religion. It consolidates by sanctifying women's domestic labours, offering a female identity which dignifies women's spiritual and moral standing, erecting class distinctions on the basis of Christian virtue, and reinforcing an ideology of separate spheres. And it offers tactical means for some women to negotiate not only greater power and protection, but routes into civic and public life (see above).³

Precisely because religion became so implicated within the gender order of industrial modernity, however, it would be extremely vulnerable to challenges and changes to this order. As Brown (2002) argues, the fact that femininity had become so closely identified with a particular brand of nineteenth-century

³ One could also mention the various forms of marginal religion which flourished in the nineteenth century, and which sought either to negotiate an advantageous position within the gender order (questing), or to overturn that order (counter-cultural) – for example, the Mormons, Shakers and Theosophists.

piety meant that the decline of the former led inevitably to the decline of the latter. Christian femininity was challenged by a range of factors, not least by feminist action and sentiment from the late nineteenth century onwards. Nevertheless, Christian ideals of feminine care, self-sacrifice, piety, domesticity and spiritual and moral responsibility for husband and family proved resilient in many quarters, both inside and outside the churches, so much so that the 1950s could witness the revival of commitment to 'traditional family values' mentioned in the previous section, and with it a brief flurry of church growth. Such growth was short-lived, however, and quickly followed by the onset of a phase of decline steeper than that which had preceded. This late modern phase of secularization set in during the 1970s and has continued to the present day in most European societies, in Canada, and, to a lesser extent, in the USA (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005: 50-60).

Although classical theories of secularization are unable to explain the speeding up of secularization after the 1960s, the gendered perspective proposed here would expect the far-reaching shifts in gender relations at the time to have exactly such a momentous impact on a religion so closely identified with the gender order of industrial society. Such shifts include not only the rise of a new feminist agenda committed to equality between the sexes, but – above all – a combination of political, social and economic changes which lead to women entering the paid workforce in ever-increasing numbers (Wharton, 2005). The simplest way of expressing the consequences for religion would be to say that women enter the iron cage around a century later than men, but when they do so the corrosive effect on their commitment to religion is similar. This is over-simple, however, because even if we ignore the fact that women enter the workplace during a later phase of capitalism, their experience of work is both similar and different from men's experience. Not only do women tend to cluster in different occupations than men, including the caring professions, and to be more likely than men to work part-time, they also continue to carry out far more unpaid domestic care work than men. The consequences for religion, as illustrated by the studies discussed earlier in this article, are complex.

For men, the transition to late modernity has been less traumatic, not only because they continue to be supported by women's traditional work of care, but because masculinist modes of autonomous, competitive selfhood adapted to the demands of late capitalism have a long-established social currency. However, insofar as the latter now break from the paternalistic modes of masculinity which dominated the era of paternalistic state and industrial enterprise, and which fitted neatly with church-endorsed modes of modern family life, this has also been corrosive of Christian commitment. With its sacred paternalism and emphasis on the gentle virtues, Christianity has always had an uneasy relationship with forms of 'hegemonic masculinity' centred around sexual and physical prowess, material success,

and 'hardness'. The re-pristination of the latter in recent times, not only in the form of 'new laddishness', but on a wider socio-economic scale with the sanction of entrepreneurial capitalism, may well be a further factor in the continuing secularization of many western societies.

BROADENING AGENDAS

This article has attempted to show how a move away from gender-blindness profoundly affects the way in which we think about religion and its relation to the social order, so much so that it impacts upon even the most foundational theories within the Sociology of Religion, namely theories of secularization. By the same token, the move from gender-blindness is likely to lead to serious re-examination of foundational concepts within the field, including the concept of 'religion' itself.

Although enshrined in the very name of the discipline, the concept of religion has received less critical examination in the Sociology of Religion than in Religious Studies, Psychology of Religion and Anthropology.

The tendency to render male practice normative in understandings of what counts as religious is evident in deep sociological assumptions about what counts as sacred, as ritual, as scripture, as belief, as religious practice, as a religious professional, a religious organisation, and so on. Studies of religion by social historians which widen their focus to include women's activities often take in a much broader range of phenomena than fall within the purview of established sociological theorising and research (see for example Williams' (1999) study of religion in Southwark). Detailed qualitative research is also extending our understanding of 'women's religion', whether that be Christianity or some other form of religious or spiritual practice (see for example McGuire, 1988, 1994, 1997; Jenkins 1999; Chambers, 2005). Sered's (1994) comparative study of religions in which women are dominant finds that although there are no universal patterns, women's religions tend to be characterised by greater concern with 'this-worldly' matters including bodily and emotional wellbeing (health and healing) and the quality of intimate and familial relationships, and to be more centred around the home, preparation of food, and sometimes the natural world. Such a conclusion is not surprising, given the widespread gender division of labour which leaves women in most societies with greater responsibility than men for bodily and emotional care, for the maintenance of affective and kin relationships, and for domestic concerns in general. What is more surprising is the way in which activities whose religious significance has previously been overlooked start to appear in a new light once a gender-critical perspective is applied (Nason-Clark and Neitz, 2001). A recent example is furnished by Day's (2005)

study of an evangelical women's prayer group, which began by assuming that the ten minutes of formal prayer at the end of the meeting was the religious element before realizing that it was the preceding activities of coffee drinking and 'chat' about friends and family which actually constituted the ritual and religious work of the group. As Sered (1994: 286) puts it, patterns which are institutionalized and esteemed in female-dominated religions tend, in other contexts, to be 'subsumed under the categories of "folk-lore", "superstition", "syncretism", "heresy", or simply, "ladies' auxiliary"'.

As well as impacting upon frameworks, theories and concepts within the Sociology of Religion, a gendered perspective may therefore start to shift the field's focus towards topics which have previously received little attention. In very general terms one may speak of a shift of concern from the 'higher' to the 'lower' or more 'mundane' aspects of religion, including the body, emotions, space and place.

CONCLUSION

This article discusses a selection of recent studies which have put gender onto the agenda of the Sociology of Religion. Such studies highlight some of the ways in which gender affects religious practice and significance, and raise awareness of the close and often constitutive relations between religion and gender. Taking the latter realisation as its starting point, the article proposes a theoretical approach to the sociological study of religion and gender which distinguishes the main ways in which religion may locate itself in relation to a prevailing gender order. This approach draws attention to the importance of power in the study of religion and in society, for it reminds us that both religion and gender are centrally implicated in unequal distributions of power, and that their interplays serve and seek to reinforce existing distributions of power or to change them – in various ways and by various means.

Although the sociological study of religion has been slow to abandon its gender-blindness, the studies considered here suggest that this situation is beginning to change. The magnitude of the change should not be exaggerated; at the present time one is likely to find one member of a faculty working on gender, one paper in an edited collection dedicated to the topic, one stream on gender at a conference on the Sociology of Religion, and so on. The belief that attention to gender can and should inform and enrich all study of religion is not yet firmly established. Changes in the academy may continue to effect change, not only as gender becomes entrenched in bordering fields, but as the gender balance begins to shift within the academic study of religion. Equally important may be the changes in religion and society which force attention to religion's relations with gender. Whether

we are looking at campaigns against homosexuality and abortion, controversies over veiling, attempts to return to 'traditional family values', religiously-inspired terrorism and violence, or radical utopian eco-feminist movements, it is no longer easy to overlook the ways in which contexts of gender change and anxiety have flushed out religion's central and abiding concern with gender roles and relations, and revealed it as one of the key sites in society for the defence or negotiation of unequal distributions of power.

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