

Book Project “Post-secular Femininities: Women’s Spirituality in Contemporary Well-Being Culture”

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Abstract

This research project concerns an ethnographic analysis of the agency of women who are involved in a continuum of practices and movements, from self-spiritualities through to life-coaching and personal growth in the context of Western Europe. I aim to explore how in this rapidly expanding area of subjective well-being culture, women are redefining the 'feminine' in ways that are challenging models of gender equality according to the dominant narrative of secular modernity. Fieldwork includes in-depth interviews with practitioners; discourse and document analysis and netnography; and participant observation at rituals, ceremonies and festivals in Belgium and some research in the Netherlands and Germany, yet embedded in a context of globalized connections and transcultural exchange. The study questions whether and to what extent understandings of identity, self and personhood; modes of sociality and community; and mind-body-spirit awareness, affect and emotionality, offered within women’s discourses and practices within multiple sites are novel in response to what has been dubbed the ‘post-secular turn’ in Western society.

Firstly, it aims to show how conceptualizations of women’s presence, power and agency in the realm of new spiritualities, MBS (Mind-Body-Spirit), coaching and personal growth challenge pre-conceived boundaries between the ‘secular’, the ‘religious’ and the ‘spiritual’ in contemporary social theory. Secondly, it hypothesizes that these ‘post-secular femininities’ signal a shift in gender relations beyond the model of liberal equality, with implications for feminist theories of sexual difference and gendered subjectivity.

The project is situated in the field of gender studies in religion. It takes an interdisciplinary approach drawing on theories from and contributing to wider debates across religious studies, sociology, anthropology, ethics, media studies, critical psychology and social and feminist theory. It includes an empirical study using qualitative research methods, such as ethnography, netnography and document and discourse analysis, focusing on the Belgian and Dutch context embedded in globalized networks and communities. Research data includes in-depth interviews with practitioners ranging from consultants, life-coaches, therapists, to healers, body-workers, ritual workers, ‘keepers’, etc, for whom the notion of the ‘feminine’ and empowering women is central their to personal identity, spiritual, ritual, and professional practice. Ethnographic sites include women’s festivals, women’s circles ceremonies, online rituals and communities, and techniques and training events in women’s spiritual, personal and professional empowerment and growth.

The output of the project includes two articles in peer-reviewed journals and a monograph.

State of the art

In the past decade, gender equality, sexual difference and reproduction have become key issues in many societal and political debates, conflicts and controversies at local, national and international levels (e.g. the recurrent heated debates over women’s veiling, abortion, homosexuality and similar issues). Gender and sexuality seem to have become the arenas or ‘battle fields’ of religion/s of the modern world, and in debates on multicultural society, including the secular liberal democracies of Western Europe characterized by increasing ethnic, cultural and religious diversity. These developments have sparked an acute need for more critical analysis within gender and feminist studies on the relationship between religion, gender and sexual equality that is often ‘displaced’ onto the cultural ‘other’ (Coene & Longman 2010; Longman, Midden & van der Brandt 2012; Scott 2009). Furthermore, beyond colonial stereotypes and the assumption that religion is oppressive to women and sexual minorities, the wide held conviction that secularism accompanies or promises gender

equality and sexual liberty is currently in question (Butler 2008; Scott 2009). Previously marked by a predominantly secular orientation, one can recently refer to a 'post-secular turn' underway in feminist theory, which involves reconsidering the positive agentic potentialities of religion for women. Post-secular research seeks to deconstruct the oppositional pairing of secularity and religion and investigate the paradoxical present-day condition in which currents of ongoing secularization and religious revival seem to co-exist (Asad 2003; Habermas 2008; Jakobsen & Pellegrini 2008; Mahmood 2009). Hence today, gender studies in the humanities and social sciences are being challenged to re-theorise the secular-religious binary, next to other binaries according to the secular narrative such as faith vs reason, private vs public, subjection vs freedom, and male vs female and to redefine what, historically, has been an 'awkward' relationship between feminism and religion in Western modernity (Aune 2011; Bracke 2008; Braidotti 2008; Graham 2012; Greed 2011; Korte 2011, Llewellyn 2013; Longman 2008; Reilly 2011).

Most social empirical research of women's religious agency in modern secular societies has focused on institutionalized or official religions, including majority and minority traditions (such as diaspora religions and religions of migrants and ethnic minorities). They show how religion is being practiced, performed, reinterpreted and reconstructed in ways that provide women modalities of agency and belonging that challenge a modernist feminist framework of understanding the sacred as either oppressive or liberatory. The present study, by contrast, looks at women's agency within the realm of contemporary spiritualities and subjective well-being culture in Western Europe, a largely unexplored area of women's agency from the perspective of post-secular critique. Women's involvement in the 'new spirituality' is not absent from empirical analysis; yet is limited to the following domains: (1) Women's (and to a lesser extent, men's) participation in longer established counter-cultural and new religious movements such as Wicca, Goddess spirituality, feminist theology, Neo-paganism and "New Age" (e.g., Crowley 2011). (2) Self-identified feminists in their relation to the religious or spiritual (e.g., Aune 2011). (3) Accounts for women's role in the 'spiritual revolution' referring to the broad field of holistic spirituality and subjective well-being culture (e.g., Houtman & Aupers 2008; Sointu & Woodhead 2008).

Research Questions

This study, by contrast, and in engagement with insights produced in the research mentioned above, focuses on the more highly individualized practices that reject the relegation of women's subjective well-being to a separate domain of 'alternative' religion or spirituality. Following the more anthropologically inspired research that rejects sociological distinctions between 'religion', the 'spiritual' and the 'secular', this study contributes to ethnographic research on religion and secularity in the European context. (Fedele & Knibbe 2013; Wood 2007; Utriainen, Hovi & Broo 2015). Our empirical research shows that practitioners for whom the notion of the 'feminine' and empowering women is central their to practice, are not contained in, but move across secular-spiritual, personal-public, leisurely-professional networks and spheres. Hence we hypothesize that this growing pool of female consultants, life-coaches, therapists, healers, body-workers, ritual workers, 'keepers', are developing discourses and practices of women's or 'feminine power', 'women's leadership', 'feminine presence' that challenge secular-religious boundaries. They propagate novel constructions of femininity, sociality and practice that sometimes do, and sometimes do not, have 'spiritual' or 'religious' referents (imagery of the divine or spirits, usage of mythological narrative, etc.). For instance, life and career coaches aim to empower women in their 'feminine energy' using meditation, body awareness techniques and organizing women's circles. Some refer to the 'divine feminine' explicitly and others mere passingly; for others using similar techniques, training schemes, rites and discourses of self-empowerment, this kind of symbolic referent, its accompanying ritual objects and imagery might be perceived as too 'fluffy'. Nevertheless, in practice, what is offered is markedly similar: the empowerment of women in their personal 'feminine' self, their energy, sexuality, body and identity. In a sense of spiritual-secular bricolage and modern-day syncretism,

practitioners draw on a range of novels; popular psychology and Jungian archetypes; through to orientalist appropriations such as Ying and Yang, Tantric symbolism, and Hindu goddesses. Consultants may privately entertain, e.g., shamanistic beliefs that inspire their outreach practices to empower other women, but are 'secularized' in the process. Thus the study also includes practitioners who draw on the feminine and are active as professional coaches and service-providing consultants at companies, business events, networking fairs. Rather than a marginal or alternative phenomenon outside of mainstream culture and society, the project aims to show how post-secular femininities are gradually becoming more mainstream by advancing into the workplace, everyday life and the former male and masculine dominated public and secular sphere.

Secondly, the empirical evidence emerging from our study challenges the idea that self-spiritualities would be simply either empowering for or oppressive to women. Some social theorists claim the 'spiritual revolution' is eclipsing traditional religion in post-traditional society by way of a 'subjective turn' towards immanent, reflexive and expressive selfhood and personal empowerment in late modernity (Helaas & Woodhead 2005; Houtman & Aupers 2007). Others who are more critical of developments such as the spiritual revolution (Carette & King 2005) and the influx of 'psy discourses' into the sphere of self-help, therapy, life-coaching and personal growth (Mäkinen 2014, Rose 1999) depart from a more Foucauldian perspective and are critical of the way, 'technologies of the self' are the product of a form of neo-liberal and secular governmentality that forecloses political critique and social change. The project explores how post-secular femininities can be analyzed and critically assessed pertaining to these key debates on power, subjectivity and agency in contemporary feminist theory. To what extent does 'personal' development offered in spiritual and wellbeing discourses and practices lead to 'political' empowerment and societal change? Do post-secular femininities move beyond mere 'self-empowerment', by forwarding the idea of 'women's power' as emerging in and from the connection and solidarity with other women? For example, our fieldwork reveals the importance of temporary and fluctuating communities in the form of women's only rites and spaces, such as women's circles. These non-institutionalized forms of ritual and community are sprouting up across the North, ranging from the commercialized circles propagated by female CEO celebrities to the more spiritual global Red Tent movement to spontaneous grass-roots local initiatives. Research on the phenomenon of 'women's circles' across spiritual-secular spheres is to date non-existent. On the one hand referred to as an 'ancient' phenomenon by practitioners, women's circles may seem reminiscent of consciousness raising groups of the second wave feminist movement. Yet our fieldwork shows that this portrayal is vehemently rejected as 'too feminist' and is presumed to revolve around victimhood. By practicing women's circles, and other rituals, ceremonies and techniques, practitioners and participants claim personal empowerment, in a non-hierarchical relation and in connection to other women. They argue this will lead to a multiplier effect of a more balanced society for women and men towards embracing more feminine values and modes of sociality that will be more effective than 'climbing the barricades' and aspiring to emulate men and masculinity.

Theoretically, we question if despite practitioners' rejection of feminism as a label and political project, do post-secular femininities in fact resonate with particular traditions in feminist thought such as in feminist citizenship theory; the ethic of care; maternal theory, etc. that problematize the public sphere and its relegation of the body, the sexual and cyclical, of care, etc. to the private? To what extent may self-spiritualities that cater to women reaffirm or challenge the gendered binaries of production/reproduction, autonomy/relationality, and mind/body? Do these spaces offer alternative experiences of self, body and spirituality that challenge dominant (neo-liberal) secular representations of the female – commodified and sexualized - body? Or, conversely, are post-secular femininities expressive of a postfeminist neo-liberal governmentality of consumer culture in which individuals are falsely construed as self-interested economic actors with agency and control over their lives? (Gill and Donaghue 2013; Phipps 2014). Do post-secular femininities merely reiterate traditional conservative gender essentialisms that have plagued many official religions, or do they

move beyond both beyond secular liberal feminism and postmodern constructivism towards a more nomadic, posthumanist type of affirmative and feminist project in which sexual difference and the sacred have a new role to play?

Finally, the project incorporates both postcolonial and intersectional feminist critique in its analysis of the empirical material. Despite their apparent trans-cultural eclecticism (Altglass 2014; Crowley 2011), it questions to what extent these spiritualities and well-being practices are grounded in the cultural, class and ethnic homogeneity of their participants? Do post-secular femininities have the potential to be inclusive, or are they ultimately founded on very particular and privileged middle-class notions of white western and heterosexual femininity and masculinity?

Research Plan & Methods

1. Literature, preparatory and pilot research: initiated in 2014
2. Fieldwork, document and data analysis: From January 2015-June 2016
3. Data analysis and writing up:
 - a. Article 1 (on womb blessings; issue on rituals today in the Low countries): Jan-March 2016 in journal *Volkskunde* (ISI Arts & Humanities index)
 - b. Article 2: April-August 2017: on digital media, religion, gender (ISI ranked journal in religious studies)
 - c. **Book manuscript: September 2016-July 2017 (SABBATICAL)**

Data overview

1. In-depth interviews with 40 practitioners in Belgium, the Netherlands and some international leaders in UK and USA (Skype).
 - a. January – June 2015: 15 interviews
 - b. August-December 2015: 10 interviews
 - c. Jan-June 2016: 15 interviews.
2. Participant observation at the following ceremonies, events, gatherings, festivals
 - a. 'Women's circles', including both grassroots local initiatives and global movements such as the Red Tent: 8 circles (3 completed)
 - b. ritual gatherings and celebrations of women's bodily processes and cycles, such as womb blessings, sweat huts, etc. : 3 ceremonies (including online blessing ceremonies)
 - c. women's festivals offering ceremonies and workshops on spirituality and personal growth: 8 festivals in Belgium (Ostara, Magisch Vrouwenfestival, Goddess conferences) and Netherlands: Lorelei.
 - d. Training and Leadership events on women's empowerment, presence, performance, leadership: 5 events
3. Document analysis and netnography: ongoing from 2014-2017. Includes analysis of primary literature produced, used or referred to by practitioners, such as books, leaflets, international literature, films, on women's spirituality, etc. Analysis websites and newsletters and online exchange in emails, community sites, online rituals, webinars, etc.

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