



‘It’s all for girls’: re-visiting the gender gap in New Age spiritualities

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Abstract

Women’s disproportionate involvement in religion has been the subject of debate in the sociology of religion for some time. In particular, the gender gap in New Age spiritualities appears considerably greater than that found in the congregational sphere of mainstream religion. This article argues that there is nothing in being a woman *per se* that may attract an individual to certain spiritual activities but rather, that it is the elective affinity between women as a group and such activities that creates the impression of a direct appeal. Much of the holistic spirituality milieu is designed by women for women, not least the most popular elements concerned with healing and well-being. It is therefore possible that the initial gap between men and women is small but it becomes subsequently reinforced and widened due to the gendered nature of alternative spirituality courses, workshops and treatments.

Key words: gender gap, New Age spiritualities, health-seeking, masculinity

Słowa kluczowe: *gender gap*, duchowość New Age, dążenie do zdrowia, męskość

Introduction

Over the past two decades the universal gender gap in religiosity has become something of an axiom in the sociology of religion. Sociologists, psychologists and historians have suggested a number of explanations for women’s greater religiosity, some more cogent than others. Women’s greater adherence to religious and spiritual beliefs and practices has been explained through references to biology, socialisation, risk aversion, and degrees of feminine orientation in both men and women¹. While most

¹ For an overview see: T. Walter and G. Davie, *The Religiosity of Women in the Modern West*, “British Journal of Sociology” 1998, No. 49, p. 640–660; R. Stark, *Physiology and Faith: Addressing the “Universal” Gender Difference in Religious Commitment*, “Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion” 2002, No. 41, p. 495–507; M. Trzebiatowska and S. Bruce, *Why Are Women More Religious Than Men?*, Oxford 2012.

contributors become caught up in attempts to provide convincing reasons for the persistent gender difference in attendance, belief, and rituals, little or no attention has been given to the question of gender categories mobilised to pose the question in the first place. But investigating the ways in which we conceptualise the issue of women's greater religiosity may enhance our understanding of the mechanism behind its social creation. In other words, the more we understand about the initial (gendered) construction and promotion of particular religious beliefs and activities, the clearer the reasons for women's greater involvement. The world of New Age spiritualities provides a useful site for exploring the matter in more depth for two reasons. First, alternative spiritualities are a serious candidate for filling the gap left by the decline in church attendance in the West². Secondly, and more importantly, the gender gap in the holistic milieu (and in the activities concerned with health and well-being in particular) is considerably greater than that found in the congregational sphere of mainstream religion³.

The aim of this article is two-fold. First, we discuss briefly the problematic aspect of mobilising rigid gender categories in the debate on gender differences in religiosity. Second, drawing on the data from the Kendal Project⁴, we analyse in more detail the composition and nature of holistic pursuits that both create and explain the male to female ratio among the practitioners and followers alike. The focus here is on the male lack of engagement as the central piece of the puzzle. We argue that there is nothing in being a woman *per se* that may attract an individual to certain spiritual activities but rather, that it is the elective affinity between women as a group and such activities that creates the impression of a direct appeal. The key lies in the initial gendering process of the activities, not in women's initial preferences. Much of the holistic spirituality milieu is designed by women for women, not least the most popular elements concerned with healing and well-being. It is therefore possible that the initial gap between men and women is small but it becomes subsequently reinforced and widened due to the gendered nature of alternative spirituality courses, workshops and treatments. Additionally, many New Age practitioners explicitly stress women's interests as their primary focus because the underlying agenda is often derived from feminist ideology which many men find either off-putting, or simply irrelevant to their lives.

A note on gender categories and the sociology of religion

The hitherto proposed answers to the question of women's greater religiosity rely on relatively rigid definitions of femininity and masculinity. The inflexible categories of women and men are particularly noticeable in the theories which explain gender

² P. Heelas and L. Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*, Oxford 2005.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 94–95.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

differences in religiosity through risk-taking⁵. Risk-preference theorists propose that women are more likely to believe in the supernatural because they are more risk-averse than men, and thus bet the right way in Pascal's wager. In her critical commentary on the nature of the debate on women's greater religiosity, Marie Cornwall points out that this explanation is premised on a crude and dated definition of both: men and women, and masculinity and femininity⁶. According to Cornwall, contributors to the debate are unreflexive in their use of terminology and concepts that belong more comfortably in the Parsonian sociology of the 1950s. Most mainstream gender scholars would be highly critical of explaining the gender gap in religiosity through 'universal differences' between men and women, while ignoring (or dismissing as irrelevant) the social processes that structure masculinities and femininities. In current sociological thought gender is conceptualised as an institution (hence a macro phenomenon in itself), which means that it cannot be read as a fixed set of traits and behaviours that span across cultures and nations. Men and women are accountable to the culturally constructed gender order and a lot of gendered behaviour rests on the pressure to act in accordance with a culturally given script⁷. Therefore, for example, quantitative survey respondents may be doing gender when ticking boxes or answering open-ended questions. Moreover, the measures used in questionnaires are in themselves social constructs. We know that what is considered devout behaviour for a woman (or a man) will vary, depending on the context. Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Judaism make different demands of men and women and complex power relations are at play at the level of everyday interactions. To complicate the matter further, what is required of a 'good Muslim' differs from what would qualify someone as a 'good Christian'. This means that gender processes in themselves are key to any explanation of religiosity because men and women do not act in a vacuum. Their actions are mediated by what they understand themselves to be in a particular social situation and what others expect them to act like. Qualitative researchers encounter similar bias, depending on the gender of both interviewers and interviewees⁸. Although Cornwall aims her criticism at the proponents of the risk explanation specifically, the problem she identifies could be extended easily to most work on the gender gap in religiosity produced to date. This reductionism is understandable (and perhaps inevitable) as comparisons require us to define the objects under scrutiny as clearly and efficiently as possible for the sake of methodological rigour. Nonetheless, our constantly developing understanding of how gender operates, how it is negotiated, constructed and deconstructed, undermined and reinforced, manipulated and imposed, means that such simplifications now appear inadequate and redundant.

⁵ See, for example, A.S. Miller and J.P. Hoffman, *Risk and religion: an explanation of gender differences in religiosity*, "Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion" 1995, No. 34, p. 63–75.

⁶ M. Cornwall, *Reifying Sex Difference is Not the Answer: Gendering Processes, Risk and Religiosity*, "Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion" 2009, No. 48, p. 252–255.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 253.

⁸ C.L. Williams and E.J. Heikes, *The Importance of Researcher's Gender in the In-depth Interview: Evidence from Two Case Studies of Male Nurses*, "Gender & Society" 1993, No. 7, p. 280–291; M.W. Sallee and F. Harris III, *Gender Performance in Qualitative Studies of Masculinities*, "Qualitative Research" 2011, No. 11, p. 409–429.

As Cornwall remarks, ‘the more interesting questions, when it comes to gender and religiosity, are about the gendering processes that constitute religious expression, experience, and religiosity differently for women and men’⁹.

Four theoretical approaches to the study of sex and gender have been identified in existing scholarship. We can study masculinity and femininity as a) subjective properties (gendered selves), b) as behaviour created and reinforced by the social structure, c) as context-dependent interaction, or d) as an amalgamation of all of the above, ‘built into social life via socialization, interaction, and institutional organization’¹⁰. The final approach appears to be the most comprehensive and useful for studying the gender gap in religiosity. Here, the concern should be less with gender as a property of individuals and more with the ways in which gender operates through interaction and social structure to produce the gendered patterns of spirituality. To make a fatuous but necessary point here, gender is something women and men do, not something they are¹¹. For both women and men doing gender implies ‘doing difference’ – creating and reinforcing inequalities¹², which leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy. For women, often more so than for men, this implies entering situations where they feel judged and restricted as a result of their female status. However, in female-only spaces, both religious and secular, the pressures tend to be weaker and the support networks stronger¹³. A similar mechanism operates for men. Like femininities, masculinities are plural and arranged hierarchically, and undeniably the rules of social engagement are dictated by privileged men over less privileged men and women. Therefore, by extension, we need to allow for the possibility that men are excluded from certain activities because of the particular form of masculinity they represent. It is no accident that homophobia and sexism both heavily inform the dominant models of masculinity – both constitute the antithesis of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemony in this sense is not physical force, or violence but rather ‘it is achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion’¹⁴. This makes hegemonic masculinity normative, rather than normal, a dominant model of what it means to be a man which is based on the production of ‘symbols that have authority despite the fact that most men and boys do not fully live up to them’¹⁵.

⁹ M. Cornwall, *op.cit.*, p. 254.

¹⁰ B. Risman, *Gender Vertigo: American Families in Transition*, New Haven 1998, p. 13.

¹¹ C. West and D.H. Zimmerman, *Doing gender*, “Gender & Society” 1987, No. 2, p. 125–151.

¹² C. West and S. Fenstermaker, *Doing difference*, “Gender & Society” 1995, No. 9, p. 8–37.

¹³ M.R. Griffith, *God’s Daughters: Evangelical Women and the Power of Submission*, Berkeley 2000; G. Kirton and G. Healy, *Shaping Union and Gender identities: a Case Study of Women-Only Trade Union Courses*, “British Journal of Industrial Relations” 2004, No. 42, p. 303–323.

¹⁴ R.W. Connell and J.W. Messerschmidt, *Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept*, “Gender & Society” 2005, No. 19, p. 832.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 846; E. Anderson (*Inclusive Masculinity: The Changing Nature of Masculinities*, New York 2009) suggests that hegemonic masculinity is a concept symptomatic of the era in which it was born (1980s) when homosexuality and femininity constituted the cultural antitheses of manhood. More recently behaviours and attitudes previously associated exclusively with femininity have become more acceptable among heterosexual men, and thus a shift has occurred from hegemonic to inclusive masculinity. In the case of the latter model, masculinities are arranged horizontally, not hierarchically, which allows for a greater diversity of expression.

Whether men themselves construe exclusion from predominantly female spaces as marginalisation is another matter, of course. Several studies have demonstrated that young men see masculinity as stressful and men as victims in the world where women wield unspoken, and publicly unacknowledged, power resulting from the victories of feminism¹⁶. Most importantly, male participants in these studies speak of feminism as alienating and hostile to most men. Considering that explicitly feminist attitudes lie at the core of holistic spiritualities, it is no wonder that men do not find them appealing. As ‘gender is always relational and patterns of masculinity are socially defined in contradistinction from some model...of femininity’¹⁷, it may be productive to approach the gender gap puzzle by turning the question on its head and exploring the reasons for men’s lack of engagement in New Age activities. This can be done partly by drawing an analogy between secular and religious/spiritual practices through the example of health-seeking behaviour and attitudes. What follows in the remainder of this article is an analysis and a tentative explanation of the workings of gender as a social institution in the holistic milieu.

Alternative spiritualities and women

Spirituality differs from religion in three distinctive ways. It is based on a belief that a supernatural force is located within the self; that becoming spiritual positively changes how one sees and experiences the world; and finally that the consequent awareness of our spirituality should make us better human beings¹⁸. These three components are consistent with the main argument of *The Spiritual Revolution* by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead. In the context of their study, the term ‘spirituality’ refers to ‘subjective-life forms of the sacred, which emphasise inner sources of significance and authority and the cultivation or sacralisation of unique subjective-lives’¹⁹. One of their central findings is that the gender gap in the world of holistic spirituality is significantly larger than that found in the congregational world of mainstream religion. 80 per cent of those who were actively involved in the New Age spirituality milieu were women²⁰. Thus many more women than men engaged in the most popular activities such as yoga and tai chi, massage, healing, reiki etc. Drawing on data from the 2001 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, Steve Bruce and Tony Glendinning identify a similar gap²¹. Respondents were asked if they had ever tried, and then if they had ever paid for, and then if they found important, a number of New Age ac-

¹⁶ N. Edley and M. Wetherell, *Jekyll and Hyde: Men's Constructions of Feminism and Feminists*, “Feminism & Psychology” 2001, No. 11, p. 439–457; B. Gough and P. Peace, *Reconstructing Gender at University: Men as Victims*, “Gender and Education” 2000, No. 12, p. 385–398; C. Hoff Sommers, *The War Against Boys: How Misguided Feminism is Harming Our Young Men*, New York 2000.

¹⁷ R.W. Connell and J.W. Messerschmidt, *Hegemonic Masculinity*, *op.cit.*, p. 848.

¹⁸ M. Trzebiatowska and S. Bruce, *op.cit.*, p. 63.

¹⁹ P. Heelas and L. Woodhead, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 4–5.

²¹ S. Bruce and T. Glendinning, forthcoming.

tivities divided into: complementary medicine, yoga and meditation, and divination. 85 per cent of women but only 55 per cent of men had dabbled, which creates the gap of 30 percent. But the more serious the involvement, the larger the gender difference: 24 per cent of women but only 10 per cent of men had tried something several times, had paid for it, and ‘thought it important in their lives’²². It is worth stressing at this point that the most popular activities were varieties of complementary medicine. Only 7 per cent of the female respondents and 3 per cent of their male counterparts described themselves as spiritual and had engaged in yoga, meditation or divination seriously. This gender chasm appears in other Western countries as well. Data from three sweeps of the World Values Survey (1981, 1990, and 2000) for fourteen European countries demonstrate that ‘spirituality is more typically embraced by post-traditional women than by post-traditional men’²³. There is something to be explained.

Explanation I: deprivation-compensation

Heelas and Woodhead account for the gender gap in contemporary spirituality by referring to rational instrumentalism in the modern world which constrains human interaction to narrow social roles. Modern individuals resolve the problem of alienation by engaging in spiritual activities. While men can find respite from the soulless public realm through family and the home, for women the problem requires a different solution. They are doubly-alienated as they already occupy the private sphere and find it unrewarding, hence need another place to escape to. According to Woodhead²⁴, women in post-traditional societies end up doubly-deprived as a result of juggling the spheres of work and home simultaneously and becoming dissatisfied with and unfulfilled in both. This idea of alienation at work as a person and at home as a woman is cogent to an extent but it has flaws as an explanation of women’s attraction to spirituality²⁵. Overall, the holistic milieu does not provide a remedy for the kind of problems that are being presented as the cause of its appeal to women. In the findings from Kendal, the most popular motivation for involvement was ‘health and fitness’. Majority of female participants cited mundane reasons (interest in physical and mental well-being) over spiritual ones (‘looking for spiritual growth’, ‘personal growth’, ‘life crises’, and ‘emotional support or human contact’)²⁶. In short, most participants (hence most women) engaged in forms of physical therapy, exercise, quasi-medical therapy, and relaxation which of themselves suggest little sign of dissatisfaction with the psychic side of life. Moreover, Heelas and Woodhead explicitly state that ‘Kendal

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ D. Houtman and S. Aupers, *The Spiritual Revolution and the New Age Gender Puzzle: the Sacralization of the Self in Late Modernity (1980–2000)* [in:] *Women and Religion in the West: Challenging Secularization*, K. Aune, S. Sharma, and G. Vincett (eds.), Aldershot 2008, p. 114.

²⁴ L. Woodhead, *Why so many women in holistic spirituality?* [in:] *A Sociology of Spirituality*, K. Flanagan and P. Jupp (eds.), Aldershot 2007, p. 119–120.

²⁵ M. Trzebiatowska and S. Bruce, *op.cit.*, p. 64–75.

²⁶ P. Heelas and L. Woodhead, *op.cit.*, p. 91.

Project findings do not support the view that those attracted are especially unhappy with their everyday lives nor suffering from significant forms of ‘deprivation’²⁷.

It is difficult to measure and compare alienation or patriarchal oppression in the domestic sphere. Undeniably, some women turn to holistic spiritualities for the purpose of self-exploration as they ‘become dissatisfied with the roles of wife, mother and nurturer’²⁸ but little is known of the circumstances that lead them to become more or less satisfied in these three roles. Married women with children are easily identified and they are the ones who should be the most doubly alienated, hence most should become involved in the holistic milieu. But the Kendal data demonstrates that the women participating in the holistic milieu were less likely than average to be married and had fewer than average children. Woodhead proposes that the holistic milieu attracts more women than men

because it makes use of resources traditionally drawn upon by women – religion and the nurturing care of other women – in order to move beyond traditional activities and the roles they entailed. The holistic milieu offers supportive and easily-accessed spaces in which the conflicts of identity facing post-traditional women in late modernity can be negotiated. Precisely because this sphere is women-dominated, it is inhospitable to the many forms of male identity based upon negation of the female. The way in which both academic and popular discourses often dismiss such spirituality as ‘pseudoscientific’, ‘pampering’, ‘trivial’, ‘diverting’, ‘irrational’, ‘psychobabble’ – often without any experience of this milieu – is a sign of this unease.²⁹

While it is the case that many men may be put off by feminine spaces and activities, their reluctance to engage still requires an explanation that extends beyond the ‘negation of the female’ and the feminine. A more sociologically plausible way of looking at it would be to focus on factors such as familiarity and gendering processes themselves.

Explanation II: familiarity and gendering as a self-fulfilling prophecy

In trying to explain people’s motives for deciding that some new activity is rewarding sociologists usually examine the potential match between existing dispositions, acquired through socialization and refined through repeated use, and the activity on offer. To use a Bourdieusian term, individuals’ choices are mostly in keeping with their *habitus*. Tastes and preferences tend to be aligned with social class, age, gender, race, ethnicity and sexuality, hence choices can be explained by identifying the characteristics the individual and the group have in common. The New Age providers respond to the feedback by making their activities and services as attractive as possible to the existing participants. Thus, it may be that the attraction of women and the repulsion of men is initially slight and that the current gender gap in New Age

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 106.

²⁸ L. Woodhead, *op.cit.*, p. 120.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 124.

involvement stems from subsequent reinforcement. Therefore, one explanation of the gender gap is that much New Age activity is promoted by women who aim to recruit other women to pursue, what are explicitly presented as, women's interests.

This initial gendering of the holistic milieu sets the tone for the subsequent patterns of participation. That a large part of the world of alternative spirituality constructs itself around gender is no surprise. After all, one of the common elements of contemporary spirituality is a deliberate rejection of patriarchy, especially in the form of the idea that the divine creator is male. Another common strand is the ecofeminist idea that industrial capitalist production is male and that cooperative craft production is female. That does not of course preclude men but there is a clear challenge to men embedded in that sphere and hence little surprise that most men are not attracted to it. Much the same point can be made about that range of therapies often called 'body-work'. Men are less likely than women to be attracted to forms of massage and healing therapy that are presented as extensions of the beauty parlour and health spa³⁰. At the same time, however, it is entirely possible that the greatest difference in relationship to holistic spirituality between men and women who share similar educational, class and occupational backgrounds lies not in starting predispositions (which is where the double-deprivation thesis places it) but at the later stage of deciding whether to continue with some New Age practice after tentative engagement or exploration. Bruce and Glendinning carried out a close analysis of the 2001 Scottish Attitudes Survey, which revealed that when asked to choose between describing themselves as 'religious', 'spiritual' or 'neither', 14 per cent of the male respondents and 16 per cent of female respondents chose 'spiritual'³¹. This is an insignificant difference. However, a careful examination of the relative effects of occupation on involvement in holistic spirituality pointed to the importance of social class rather than gender. Men and women employed in social, education and health professions were more likely than other professionals and people in skilled and unskilled manual occupations to be interested in holistic spirituality and to have sampled yoga, meditation and the like. There is an additional, separate contribution from gender. When Bruce and Glendinning compared gender differences at each stage of a 'career' from thinking of oneself as spiritual, to initial experimentation, through to regularly engaging in well-being practices and finding them important, they found that more men than women drop out. Male social, education and health professionals may be willing to try alternative practices associated with personal self-development and well-being but they do not continue with them to the extent that women do.³² Survey data does not tell us why initial male sympathy does not translate into regular engagement at the same rate as that of women but we can put it down to the feature mentioned above: much of the holistic spirituality milieu is designed by women for women. Woodhead rules out that possibility at the start of her deprivation explanation when she says that 'holistic spir-

³⁰ Cf. K. Barber, *The Well-Coiffed Man: Class, Race and Heterosexual Masculinity in the Hair Salon*, "Gender & Society" 2008, No. 22, p. 455–476.

³¹ S. Bruce and T. Glendinning, forthcoming.

³² *Ibidem*.

itualities are not inherently gendered'.³³ But from a sociological point of view, nothing is 'inherently' gendered. What matters is that the gendering processes themselves make the content of holistic spirituality milieu heavily oriented to women.

Practice and repetition are key to mastering any activity. Men's reluctance to participate in holistic activities such as yoga classes may be as simple as their lack of skill in comparison to women. This seems counter-intuitive at first, considering the dominant model of masculinity accords more physical power and skill to men but the founder of Men's Yoga classes in the UK, Paul Michael Thomson, explains the rationale behind the reluctance thus:

Men often tell me that they can't do yoga because the classes are full of very flexible women, standing on their heads or in poses that they could never accomplish... Lots of men tell me that they are not very flexible or will feel silly practising these moves³⁴.

Far from equating femininity with weakness, or labelling the activity as 'girly', these men seem to admire the skill and prowess exhibited by female participants, while at the same time claiming that women are 'naturally' more suited to this kind of physical activity.

This reading of femininity by men tends to be applied to emotional well-being in the religious context as well. For example, a member of the Promise Keepers, a conservative Christian organisation for men, commented: 'men have a "tendency" for "carrying" private hurts by themselves. Women have a much easier time. (...) [women] are relational by nature. They can talk about things a lot more freely than we do'³⁵. The point is open to interpretation, of course, but one gets the impression that these men admire and envy, rather than despise certain supposedly 'natural' feminine skills. Anecdotal evidence garnered through personal communication and web blogs demonstrates that there are very few men attending yoga classes in England and Scotland, and that those who do are treated with suspicion or amusement by the seasoned female participants, and singled out by the (female) instructor³⁶. 'Yoga in America', a study commissioned and published in 2008 by Yoga Journal, discovered that 72 per cent of yoga practitioners surveyed were women³⁷. Few people enjoy the oddity status in a relatively homogenous group, which may explain why the men rarely return. This sentiment could also be read as an expression of the masculine definition of health and fitness as closely tied to functionality, activity and performance³⁸.

³³ E. Sointu and L. Woodhead, *Spirituality gender and expressive selfhood*, "Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion" 2008, No. 47, p. 259–276.

³⁴ P. Thomson, *Men's Classes*, <http://www.pmtiyoga.co.uk/mens-classes/> [accessed: 20.06.2012].

³⁵ J.P. Bartkowski, *The Promise Keepers: Servants, Soldiers and Godly Men*, New Brunswick, NJ 1999.

³⁶ P. Bee, *He Was Invading My Sanctuary*, "Guardian", 16 October 2007, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2007/oct/16/healthandwellbeing.health1> [accessed: 8.05.2012]; A. Tillin, *Where Are All the Men?*, "Yoga Journal", <http://www.yogajournal.com/lifestyle/2585> [accessed: 3.01.2013].

³⁷ *Yoga in America*, Yoga Journal, http://www.yogajournal.com/media/originals/YJ_PR_YogaAmerica.pdf [accessed: 17.06.2012].

³⁸ S.L. Dworkin and F.L. Wachs, *Body Panic: Gender, Health and the Selling of Fitness*, New York 2009.

A man whose body is not trained to perform challenging yoga poses does not wish to be put in a position where he is passive and cannot compete. But yoga teachers have recently begun to advertise their classes to men specifically, thus opening up the activity in the process. For example, on his website, Thomson extols the stress-relieving qualities of yoga for men:

Also, yoga will help you with your personal stress, as men are finding that the 21st century is a very stressful experience; work, life, home, looking after the children, money – it all helps to make life very complicated³⁹.

Stress is classed as a modern-day disease, endemic in western societies and men are susceptible to it because of changes in gender roles and expectations. The public/private divide has become less clear-cut for men who are increasingly expected to contribute to household tasks and child-rearing (instead of treating the private purely as a refuge from the public), so holistic ways of addressing the resulting stress should appeal to men as much as to women but they do not. One can imagine an ‘Extreme Team’ yoga, with competitions, scores, player performance statistics, and physical violence, that would be of interest to men but as currently practised it seems the negation of everything commonly associated with masculinity, as do most holistic therapies.

All of the above could be subsumed under what psychologists refer to as ‘gender priming’. A team of researchers at Washington University conducted a survey of undergraduates in order to explore whether the male geek image of a computer scientist decreases the appeal of this kind of work to women⁴⁰. The participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire on their interest in computer science. In one version of the experiment the room was filled with items stereotypically associated with a geeky lifestyle: a Star Trek poster, comics, video game boxes, fast food, and technical literature. Under those conditions women declared themselves to be less interested in computer science. In another version the décor was more neutral: an art poster, water bottles, general interest magazines and mainstream literature on computing. Here, the gender gap disappeared and the level of interest was equal between women and men. The experiment highlights the ‘power of environments to signal to people whether or not they should enter a domain’ and clearly demonstrates that altering a setting can ‘inspire those who previously had little or no interest...’ to become interested⁴¹. The same mechanism operates in the case of the holistic activities. Making the setting less stereotypically female may well inspire male participants to stick around. Not only are we attracted to what we think of as ‘our kind of thing’ – we also tend to favour what we think we are skilled at. These beliefs are also heavily informed by our internalized gender standards. The men who felt yoga was not for them assessed their abilities against the feminine features they attributed to the practice. It seems that the extent to which implicit views of what constitutes masculine and feminine activities shape individuals’ decisions is often underestimated.

³⁹ P. Thomson, *op.cit.*

⁴⁰ S. Cheryan, V.C. Plaut, P.G. Davies, and C.M. Steele, *Ambient Belonging: How Stereotypical Cues Impact Gender Participation in Computer Science*, “Journal of Personality & Social Psychology” 2009, No. 97, p. 1045–1060.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. 1058.

Extending the analogy to the secular: gender differences in health-seeking behaviour

As discussed above, the most popular activities in the holistic milieu tend to be those concerned with physical and psychological health and well-being, not those centred around explicitly spiritual interests or pursuits. An alternative way of looking at the research results of the Kendal Project is to note that there is a fascinating world of customer-driven self-help medical and physical therapy that is dominated by women. The key question then becomes not, why women are more spiritual than men, but why women are apparently much more interested than men in a certain type of health and exercise. The concern with diet, healing, and exercise regimes continues to re-surface in the contemporary studies of women and religion⁴². The connection can also be traced back to the nineteenth century when a number of female-led millennialist religious groups promoted innovative healing and dietary regimes. The female leaders and founders were as much concerned with physical and psychological well-being as with spiritual development. Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, for example, suffered from ill-health throughout her childhood and brought her concern with physical well-being into her spiritual explorations. She formulated the core of Christian Science in the aftermath of her unexpected recovery from a serious spinal injury. She rejected conventional medicine and instead advocated healing through Jesus Christ⁴³. Similarly, Ellen White of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church promoted a vegetarian diet, abstinence from alcohol and tobacco and a severe exercise programme⁴⁴. A Spiritualist, Mary Greeley, dieted to control the passions and imposed an ascetic regime on her husband Horace⁴⁵. Mabel Balrtrop, the leader of the Panacea Society, produced curative ‘seals’ which were meant to ward off evil and later became the staple of a worldwide healing ministry⁴⁶.

This link between gender and health-related behaviour can be extrapolated to the wider social realm. Patterns of religious behaviour often correspond to their secular equivalent, hence drawing an analogy helps to shed light on the gender gap in spirituality. A widely reported and studied difference between men and women regards the relative likelihood of seeking help for medical problems and more generally, the highly gendered attitudes to the body. First, women are more likely than men to actively seek conventional and unconventional health treatment⁴⁷. Second, women are generally more concerned with bodywork as manifested in fitness, dietary and beauty

⁴² B.E. Brasher, *Godly Women: Fundamentalism and Female Power*, New Brunswick, NJ 1998; M.R. Griffith, *op.cit.*

⁴³ M. Baker Eddy, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, Boston 1910.

⁴⁴ E.G. White, *The Ministry Of Healing*, <http://www.whiteestate.org/books/mh/mh.asp> [accessed: 16.09.2012].

⁴⁵ B. Goldsmith, *Other Powers: The Age of Suffrage, Spiritualism, and the Scandalous Victoria Woodhull*, New York 1999.

⁴⁶ J. Shaw, *Octavia, Daughter of God: the Story of a Female Messiah and Her Followers*, New Haven 2011.

⁴⁷ W.H. Courtenay, *Constructions of Masculinity and Their Influence on Men's Well-Being: a Theory of Gender and Health*, “Social Science and Medicine” 2000, No. 50, p. 1385–1401.

regimes. Curiously, a survey of attitudes to body disposal has shown that women are also more worried than men about the state of their bodies after they die⁴⁸. Women are more anxious than men about being buried or cremated alive and about the decay of their bodies. As it is based on scientific claims, traditional medicine may present less of a problem for men, but the image of alternative healing embodies the antithesis of what many understand as ‘proper masculinity’. This makes holistic solutions easier to disregard as unscientific and untrustworthy.

The affinity between religious and health interests among women can also be linked to the sacralisation of health and body in the western culture. American studies suggest that gender is quite likely the ‘strongest predictor of preventive and health-promoting behaviour’ as well as being one of the most important socio-cultural factors that influence health-related behaviour. Indeed, women engage in far more health-promoting behaviours than men and have more healthy lifestyle patterns⁴⁹. Furthermore, women are more likely than men to make beneficial changes in their exercise habits and are less likely to be overweight. There are also major differences in how men and women use medical facilities. Although the gender gap tends to disappear the more serious the illness, adult men make far fewer visits to doctors than do women (once those associated with reproduction are removed from the equation). The primary reason for this lies in the very ways that gender stereotypes are constructed. Men see the denial of pain and weakness as part of being robust and strong. For example, American ‘men are demonstrating dominant norms of masculinity when they refuse to take sick leave from work’⁵⁰. Similarly, British men are more likely than British women to make unhealthy choices and when they become ill, they are slower to do anything about it⁵¹. Also, men have been shown to distance themselves actively from ‘bodywork’ understood as beautification and modification⁵². They aim toward more physical competency and practical ability in the quest for self-fulfillment that women may pursue through holistic spirituality. This does not, however, mean that they escape a variation of the pressures that women have long been subjected to. Men are caught up in the contradiction where they feel the need to aspire to the culturally desirable masculinity (lean, healthy and competent) and also the obligation to remain detached from their embodiment. Paying too much attention to the finer details of bodywork undermines the very masculinity the process is designed to achieve. In other words, trying too hard is not manly – being practical about one’s body is. If the explanation of men’s reluctance to seek conventional health care treatment – that it demonstrates weakness – is at all plausible, most alternative therapies will be even less attractive because

⁴⁸ D. Davies and A. Shaw, *Reusing Old Graves: a Report on Popular British Attitudes*, Crayford, Kent 1995.

⁴⁹ W.H. Courtenay, *op.cit.*, p. 1386.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 1389.

⁵¹ R. O’Brien, K. Hunt, and G. Hart, “It’s Caveman Stuff, but that is to a Certain Extent How Guys Still Operate”: Men’s Accounts of Masculinity and Help Seeking, “Social Science and Medicine” 2005, No. 61, p. 503–516.

⁵² M.E. Norman, *Embodying the Double-Bind of Masculinity: Young Men and Discourses of Normalcy, Health, Heterosexuality, and Individualism*, “Men and Masculinities” 2011, No. 14, p. 431.

the general ethos that underpins ‘healing’ is the notion that we are responsible for our own ill-health because we have not been positive enough. This suggests that the gender differences visible in two elements of the holistic spirituality milieu – health-promoting group activities such as yoga and individual healing consultations – may well be a continuation of ‘secular’ patterns.

One explanation of men’s risky behaviour with regard to health stipulates that men’s health is often taken care of by their female relatives, or partners: mothers, wives, girlfriends, sisters and so on. As a result, men are not well-versed in health-related behaviour as they rarely engage in it. This, in turn brings us to the significance of the emasculating effects of physical illness in religious conversion. For example, many Colombian men convert to Pentecostalism as a result of being healed at evangelical services to which their wives have taken them. This is presented as a logical outcome of the encounter between machismo and the weakness of physical illness. When a man becomes ill, he withdraws into the home and hence into the sphere of female influence. Moreover, he becomes physically dependent on his wife. As Elizabeth Brusco notes in *The Reformation of Machismo*⁵³, his converted wife ‘is armed with the logic of the church to argue that his illness is the result of his *vicios* (vices), and that only by giving them up will he be well again’. More generally, the ideology of machismo can be demanding on Colombian men and conversion liberates them from the culturally imposed role. In this sense, religious engagement softens traditional masculinity in the case of male Pentecostals in Colombia.

Gendering New Age spiritualities

How does this gendering process occur and who is doing it? It is useful at this stage to re-visit briefly hegemonic masculinity⁵⁴. The concept has become a staple reference point in any scholarly discussion of gender norms and stereotypes over the past twenty five years or so. It is an ideal type that does not necessarily correspond to the lives of any particular men but instead expresses male fantasies, goals and desires: ‘it is men’s and boys’ practical relationship to collective images or models of masculinity, rather than simple reflections of them, that is central to understanding gendered consequences in violence, health, and education’⁵⁵. In this sense, we can use hegemonic masculinity as a tool to make sense of gender dynamics in a variety of social realms. In the case of health behavior, by reproducing and thus reinforcing their difference from women, men contribute to constructing the image of femininity as weak and in need of medical attention. In the realm of religion and spirituality, relying on the supernatural force for one’s emotional well-being stereotypically signifies weakness and dependence, neither of which is traditionally masculine. By dismissing their healthcare needs, and by extension their general well-being needs, men engage in

⁵³ E. Brusco, *The Reformation of Machismo, Evangelical Conversion and Gender in Columbia*, Texas 1995, p. 117–118.

⁵⁴ R.W. Connell, *Masculinities*, Cambridge, UK, 1995.

⁵⁵ R.W. Connell and J.W. Messerschmidt, *op.cit.*, p. 841.

constructing gender. The most traditional beliefs about masculinity happen to be the strongest predictor of risk-taking behaviour in relation to health: smoking, drinking, drug-taking and unprotected sex⁵⁶. This, in turn, points to the fact that when it comes to spirituality and holistic practices, men who endorse alternative masculinities might also be more attracted to ‘feminine’ spiritual pursuits but will fall away eventually.

In response to the critique of holistic spiritualities as individualistic, Heelas argues that ‘the shared’ is in evidence because relevant values and assumptions are *already* shared by a great many of those who become participants⁵⁷. However, it seems that the values and assumptions develop later, after the initial gendering of the activities becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Many New Agers work in people-centred well-being professions, and as there are fewer men than women in these professions, the initial pool from which NA draws is gendered already. In a recent study of a ‘New Age’ Catholic retreat in Worth Abbey, the sample consisted of five men and fourteen women and all of the participants were middle-class, two-thirds had university degrees and half were employed in caring professions⁵⁸. Another investigation of New Age reveals that when asked whether the experience of spirituality differs for men and women, four out of five male respondents felt it did not while two thirds of female respondents claimed it did⁵⁹. If this difference in the perception of spirituality is acknowledged from the outset by more women than men, then women may also be more likely to seek out activities that are tailored specifically to a female audience. While the content of holistic spiritualities distinct from more traditional forms of religion (such as evangelical Christianity, or Orthodox Judaism), the personal benefits of engagement that participants point to very often overlap. Consider, for example, a female client speaking of her female homeopath:

She’s a woman and we have other identities in common as well and that *makes* me feel safe with her... So if I was going to see a man, I wouldn’t be as relaxed. (...) I just know that, you know, she understands and even though life experiences are different, she has an empathy⁶⁰.

A similar statement is made by Judith, a female convert in Brasher’s study of evangelical Christian congregations:

My sole purpose in going to a woman’s ministry was that there wouldn’t be men there. I felt safe personally because there would be other women. It had nothing to do with their age, experiences, or anything else, other than that they were women⁶¹.

Both women express something more than simply a preference for a particular spiritual form of expression and practice. They point to a shared gender identity,

⁵⁶ W.H. Courtenay, *op.cit.*, p. 1392.

⁵⁷ P. Heelas, *The Infirmary Debate: On the Viability of New Age Spiritualities of Life*, “Journal of Contemporary Religion” 2006, No. 21, p. 231.

⁵⁸ L. Thomas, *Changing Old Habits? ‘New Age’ Catholicism, Subjectivity and Gender in BBC 2’s The Monastery and Its Reception*, “European Journal of Cultural Studies” 2011, No. 14, p. 564.

⁵⁹ S. Rose, *Is the Term ‘Spirituality’ a Word that Everyone Uses, But Nobody Knows What Anyone Means by it?*, “Journal of Contemporary Religion” 2001, No. 16, p. 203.

⁶⁰ E. Sointu and L. Woodhead, *op.cit.*, p. 503.

⁶¹ B.E. Brasher, *op.cit.*, p. 137.

which for them seems sufficient to make a spiritual/religious activity appealing. When women speak favourably of a male practitioner it is precisely because he does *not* exhibit the traits associated with male domination or oppression. He is described as gentle, nice, approachable, warm, friendly and trustworthy: ‘it is gentle care and trust that Lillian values about the relationship she has with William’⁶². Holistic spiritualities may serve as a safe haven for both women and men who do not fit the dominant model of masculinity. Regardless of their gender, participants engage in a flight from hegemonic masculinity through their involvement and the gender gap in holistic spiritualities is an extension of secular displays of hegemonic masculinity in health-related behaviour, to name just one. Thus, the phenomenon is not restricted to the world of either holistic spirituality, or traditional religion. It is simply the case that like attracts like and people feel more at ease and more comfortable with others like them, whatever this affinity or likeness may entail. The key thing with regard to the holistic milieu, and health and well-being in particular, is not that the female participants are specifically attracted to these types of activities but that a) they are more open to trying what they see as compatible with their sense of identity and needs and b) the affinity is then reinforced (and reproduced) because of the activities being created by and for people like them. As demonstrated above, the answer to why more women than men are attracted to (some forms of) holistic spirituality lies in the general willingness to maintain commitment, not in the initial attraction. It is possible that more women are likely to carry on with their engagement because the milieu is so female-dominated. In the words of a teenage boy who accompanied the authors on a visit to a New Age retreat: ‘It’s all for girls’.

Conclusion

Two potential explanations of women’s preponderance in alternative spiritualities (understood as the most popular activities in the holistic milieu) emerge. First, the gendering of the milieu occurs early on and becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, the side-effect of which is feminisation. Second, as the most popular elements of alternative spiritualities are centred around psychological and physical well-being, there is a reason to link men’s general attitudes to health with their attitudes to New Age, i.e. their reluctance to seek help. The two reasons converge at the point of gendered constructions of behaviour. Despite significant changes in the gendered division of labour, the gender order remains relatively dichotomous, and dominant models of masculinity and femininity remain mutually exclusive in the collective imagination. On average, what attracts women will repel men but not necessarily because the latter are genuinely uninterested, but rather because the manner in which the activity is presented and advertised does not resonate with their culturally given notion of what a man should be or do. This is why even the men who ‘give it a go’ tend to drop

⁶² E. Sointu and L. Woodhead, *op.cit.*, p. 505.

out after a while⁶³. Moreover, women risk less of a social stigma if they associate themselves with New Age activities because the latter are perceived as compatible with a feminine worldview, hence the cultural manifestation of biological femininity. Men, on the other hand, would need to embrace an alternative or non-hegemonic masculinity in order to engage fully in holistic spiritualities, which can often be read as unmanly, effeminate, and therefore inferior, by other men. For men, the costs of serious involvement are higher than for women.

Therefore it is the relationship between New Age spiritualities coded as feminine and masculinity as the opposite of both spirituality and femininity that can help us to understand the preponderance of women in holistic, health and well-being activities. In fact, the public image of such activities contributes to the reinforcement of 'compensatory manhood acts'⁶⁴. Manhood acts signify masculinity through exerting control and resisting being controlled by others⁶⁵. Men who refuse to engage in NA spiritualities and dismiss them as 'for girls', or 'pampering', do so as a way of symbolically asserting and demonstrating masculinity. Similarly, in the realm of health exerting control is the key to enacting masculinity. Male interviewees in a study of gendered approaches to health-seeking agreed that 'if you go to the doctor you have lost the battle'⁶⁶ because admitting weakness goes against the normative masculinity which is based on the ability to cope. In effect, manhood acts may indirectly lead to exacerbated health problems⁶⁷. The only acceptable approach to seeking help for health, or well-being issues has to be rooted in problem-solving because only then can it be reframed as a masculine act⁶⁸. But New Age spiritualities are the exact opposite of quick fixes. Holistic treatments take time, they are multi-dimensional, they draw on a wide variety of methods and resources, and the outcome is usually open-ended. They also require the suspense of cynicism and pragmatism in problem-solving.

In traditional Christian congregations there is more scope for men to draw firm boundaries between the feminine and the masculine, and to reproduce male privilege via references to the word of God, or immutable religious truths. In New Age spiritualities, the boundaries between the sexes are fluid and negotiable. This fluidity and flexibility do not sit well with an average man, which may be another reason why he would be less attracted to the context that promotes such attitudes. Even in some LGBT Christian churches which are necessarily based on inclusivity and gender equality, hegemonic models of masculinity are mobilised in order to establish male dominance over the congregation⁶⁹. It is hard to imagine a similar situation in a God-

⁶³ S. Bruce and T. Gledinning, forthcoming.

⁶⁴ D. Schrock and M. Schwalbe, *Men, Masculinity and Manhood Acts*, "Annual Review of Sociology" 2009, No. 35, p. 277–295; M.B. Ezzell, "I'm in Control": *Compensatory Manhood Acts in a Therapeutic Community*, "Gender & Society" 2012, No. 26, p. 190–215.

⁶⁵ E.J. Sumerau, "That's What Men Are Supposed to Do": *Compensatory Manhood Acts in an LGBT Christian Church*, "Gender & Society" 2012, No. 26, p. 461–487.

⁶⁶ H. Farrimond, *Beyond the Caveman: Rethinking Masculinity in Relation to Men's Help-Seeking*, "Health" 2012, No. 16, p. 9.

⁶⁷ R. O'Brien, K. Hunt and G. Hart, *op.cit.*

⁶⁸ H. Farrimond, *op.cit.*, p. 14.

⁶⁹ E.J. Sumerau, *op.cit.*

dess workshop, or at a pagan doll-making retreat. In a wider sense, one could argue that New Age spiritualities contribute indirectly to cultivating hegemonic masculinity – the milieu provides a clear-cut, feminised bank of holistic activities marketed to women by women, thus it gives an average man a symbol of the ‘opposite’ sex to position himself against.

