
This collection of essays is a companion volume to the editors’ previous 2013 book, *Gender and Power in Contemporary Spirituality: Ethnographic Approaches*. This volume is self-billed as the first to address the “gendered intersections of religion, spirituality and the secular through an ethnographic approach” (blurb inside front cover). It contains an introductory chapter by the editors, followed by eleven chapters from other contributors. This compilation offering is concluded with an afterword by Linda Woodhead.

The introductory chapter from the editors theorises on what is yet to come in the book, as well as discussing other works in the field. It is a dense, highly referenced essay in itself. The style of each chapter differs widely, which can be perceived as a positive, as the authors’ voices are clear in each chapter. The different voices are actually one of the book’s greatest strengths, as is the diversity of subjects within a broad theme of gendered spirituality. At the same time, the different research areas, voices and styles of writing require focused concentration if reading the book through from beginning to end.

The collection brings together established and fresh voices, and whilst written in English, “most authors are not native English speakers” (p. 16)—a breadth sought deliberately by the editors, to overcome Anglo-centrism. Whilst the specific research contexts may be diverse, it is acknowledged by the editors in the introduction, only the Americas and Western Europe are represented, with research from Africa, Asia, Oceania and Eastern Europe noticeably absent. Each contribution is a piece of stand-alone research and interesting in its own right. It may be due to the wide range of research sites that on first reading, it is not obvious how working-class men taking up yoga in prison in Spain (chapter 10) connects, for example, with the selling of goods in a Mennonite-founded shop in the USA and Canada (chapter 7). However, the more deeply one studies the book, the more connections emerge, especially if the introductory chapter is revisited again at the end of the book.

The eleven essays themselves, are based on research in eleven countries: Belgium, UK, Mexico, Italy, France, Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, Canada, USA, and Switzerland. They undoubtedly cover an eclectic mix of research sites, from feminist spirituality as lived religion in the UK and goddess spirituality in Italy; to exploring the sacred feminine in Mexico’s Neopagan women’s circles and wild woman workshops in Belgium; concluding with an exploration of queer religiosities and secular spirituality among Montreal Pagans. These topics are explored through various methods including partic-
participant observation, semi-structured interviews, informal and formal interviews, and surveys.

The importance of intersectionality arises in various chapters of the book. The issue of class appears a number of times, as does the issue of challenging or accepting gender norms as they present themselves in particular contexts. The introductory chapter describes the contributors as exploring the “spiritual experiences of women and their struggle for a more gender equal way of approaching the divine” (p. 13), which is certainly evident in some chapters. However, there are other chapters in which this is less of a focus, nor are all chapters about the spiritual experiences of women. In chapter 5’s ethnographic look at gendered eco-spirituality, a belief in complementarity emerges. The participants involved in the research explicitly state that they adhere to traditional gender roles in rituals and ceremonies. Whilst the participants rationalise and justify this, the result, in practice, is the silencing and passivity of women. Similarly, women involved in the Mexican Neopagan women’s circles in chapter 4, expressed a desire to empower women, whilst at the same time, reinforcing traditional gender roles, tasks and clothing. From their perspective, there is no contradiction in this. As editors Fedele and Knibbe both comment in their individual chapters (8 and 9), while spirituality tends to be seen as gender equal, this assumption needs to be researched, as chapters 4 and 5 clearly demonstrate.

Both of these chapters discuss research based in Mexico, a traditionally Catholic country, often seen as strong on machismo, which draws attention to the importance of context. As the editors recognise in their introduction, religion, secularity and spirituality do not exist in a vacuum, each can be seen to develop in reaction to its context and to each other. These areas are not distinct, but are often interconnected, as Aune states in chapter 1. In discussing any of the three areas, particularly their intersections, there is a certain specificity involved contextually. This is also where the editors’ approach of seeking contributions from those writing on spirituality from a lived religion perspective seems entirely appropriate.

Contributing to the conversation around public and private spaces, the book also seeks to explore how spirituality, often deemed private, has enjoyed an almost silent public emergence in many places. This is contrasted with the relative noise of debate which surrounds religion in the public domain. This silent spirituality is illustrated well by the study on men taking up yoga in prison in chapter 10. Due to the yoga sessions on offer being seen as a secular activity improving physical wellbeing, a spiritual practice has been rendered invisible by acceptability. In another example of the interconnectedness of the three areas, spirituality is shown to be more acceptable to a secular institution.
than religion, which is reported by Griera as being much more highly regulated.

As the subtitle suggests, the editors argue for spirituality to be seen as a third term in the usual binary religious-secular divide. Given that simplistic binaries are rarely helpful where human beings are concerned, and of this being a false divide anyway, they propose a triangle instead. This is referred to as the “vagina triangle” (p. 14). A phraseology chosen specifically to highlight the importance of gender when analysing the three points of religion, secularity and spirituality. Whilst I can appreciate the move away from binary separation to triangular connectedness in this model, the subsequent labelling descriptors at each point of the triangle risk losing the fluidity just opened up. Many of the labels in the triangular diagram (p. 15) would be contested by those they do not comfortably fit. For example, “revaluing the feminine” listed under the “Spiritual domain”, is not born out by all spiritual practitioners appearing in the book. It is also possible that some religious practitioners and those inhabiting secular spaces would claim this label too. Additionally, I feel sure that Quakers and others, would challenge the “hierarchical communities” label attached to the “Religious domain”. So too, may some humanists object to the “exploitation of the earth” label in the “Secular domain”. There will be exceptions to all the label descriptors, so it is important that the vagina labels are periodically allowed to leak.

In terms of recommending this volume, it will be a great addition to academic libraries. I agree with the editors, that it will be especially interesting for anthropologists, sociologists as well as others exploring spirituality and gender dynamics.

Suzanne Vernon-Yorke
Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, Coventry University,
Coventry, UK
vernonys@uni.coventry.ac.uk