Fedele, A. & K.E. Knibbe (eds), 2013


Over the past few decades, spirituality seems to have gained importance in many Western societies, at the expense of established religion. New spiritual movements form a popular object of research among anthropologists, theologians and religious studies scholars. As noted by Anna Fedele and Kim E. Knibbe, editors of *Gender and Power in Contemporary Spirituality*, research on the role of gender and power within these movements remains relatively underdeveloped in that it is seldom supported by ethnographic evidence and seems to focus almost exclusively on the context of the United States. The present volume, then, seeks to fill the knowledge gap by presenting a wide range of ethnographic research, carried out by young scholars, on the role of gender and power in contemporary spiritual movements in various national contexts outside of the US. The volume is the outcome of a panel entitled “Spirituality Against Religion: The Role of Gender and Power”, held in 2010 in Maynooth, Ireland, and coordinated by the editors. The necessity to explore gender and power as particular themes of interest derives from prevailing gendered presumptions in much of the scientific discourse which constructs religion and spirituality as oppositional phenomena. Many researchers, taking the ‘spiritual revolution’ thesis posed by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead as their point of departure, come to a conception of religion as, for instance, fixed, authoritative and hierarchically structured versus spirituality as flexible, gender-equal and nonhierarchical (Fedele & Knibbe 2013, 6). Based on this binary opposition, one would expect (and many researchers maintain) that within new spiritual movements, traditional gender roles and symbolism are questioned and replaced by more gender-equal convictions and practices. Fedele and Knibbe question this strict division of religion and spirituality (religion can be flexible and spiritual, while spirituality can be hierarchical and authoritative), and as a result they pose the question whether and how gendered power relations
are in fact being renegotiated in new spiritual movements. While the editors reflect on previous scholarly work on religion and spirituality (e.g. Pamela Klassen, Talal Asad) in relation to gender (e.g. Cynthia Eller, Tanya Luhrmann) and power (e.g. Michel Foucault, Jeremy Carrette, Richard King), they have refrained from providing the contributors with an extensive theoretical framework, inviting them to develop theory from their ethnographic studies instead.

The eleven contributions provide the reader with a broad sample of the wide range of practices, communities, convictions, rituals and identities prevalent in contemporary spirituality. National contexts include, for instance, Portugal, Germany, France, Greece, Israel, and the Netherlands. The authors show how power may be related to the charismatic qualities of spiritual leaders (Rachel Werczberger), the development of a woman-centred spirituality ( Åsa Trulsson, Anna Fedele), and the hierarchical structure of spiritual movements (Monica Cornejo). The ethnographic material (most authors conducted fieldwork, often taking part in spiritual movements and/or conducting in-depth interviews) is rich and offers an insight in the lived reality of the practitioners of contemporary spirituality. Many authors have taken the editor’s critique on the ‘spiritual revolution’ thesis offered by Heelas and Woodhead as their point of departure. This lends consistency to the volume, ensuring a common focus in the chapters, and prevents authors from perpetuating the binary opposition between religion and spirituality which the editors have so convincingly questioned.

Throughout the book, the authors provide ample evidence for the editors’ proposition that gender and power are being renegotiated in contemporary spirituality, and that this can be empowering for its practitioners but may also reinforce gendered power relations. Eugenia Roussou’s chapter on gendered responses to a Greek ‘spiritual revolution’, for instance, shows how ksema-triastres, female ‘evil eye healers’, may claim charisma by introducing traditional female spiritual practices within Greek Orthodoxy. Roussou’s chapter, though offering a somewhat one-sided view on the Greek Orthodox church as wanting “to maintain the dominance of the ritual” and being “the king of Orthodox rituals” (Fedele & Knibbe, 53), shows that when boundaries between established religious doctrine and lay spiritual practice are being blurred, women may claim for themselves a distinct role, thereby also claiming agency. Knibbe’s chapter on contemporary spirituality in the Netherlands, moreover, is an excellent example of the complicated ways in which gender is conceived and constructed within the discourses of spiritual societies. Knibbe shows how the ‘discourse of expressive individualism’ (Heelas and Woodhead), in which practitioners choose to make their own path outside the boundaries of social conventions a key element, may in fact oppress women who identify with precisely those conventions.