‘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 women. While most

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 West. 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 religion.

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 Project, 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

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3 *Ibidem*, p. 94–95.
4 *Ibidem*. 