
Book Review

AUNE, K., S. SHARMA and G. VINCETT, eds. 2008. *Women and Religion in the West: Challenging Secularization*. Aldershot: Ashgate. xi + 230 pp. ISBN 978 0 7546 5870 2. Hbk. £50.00.

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This fascinating book is part of Ashgate's "Theology and Religion in Interdisciplinary Perspective" series published in association with the British Sociological Association (BSA) Sociology of Religion Study Group. This is the fifth title in the series, with several chapters originating from the Study Group's 2005 conference on "Religion and Gender" at Lancaster University. The volume provides extensive discussions of the different theoretical connections between women, religion and secularization and is supported by empirical data from different religions and spiritualities drawn from widely varying contexts.

The book stands out through its clarity of organization and presentation. The Introduction provides a good overview of the complex relationships that pertain between women, religion and secularization, balanced by a final Afterword that concludes the three major sections of this book. These are equally divided between Christianity (Part I), Alternative Spiritualities (Part II), and Islam (Part III), each of which consists of four chapters. There is much to be learnt from the wide-ranging research presented here but, as is to be expected from a multi-authored volume, the contributions vary considerably in length, range of data, depth of analysis, critical awareness and theoretical sophistication. The assessment of the intrinsic interest of different chapters will vary according to particular readers' prior research interests and knowledge.

The contributors come from England, the Netherlands, Denmark, Poland, Canada and the USA, a wide range no doubt, but by no means representing the whole of the "post-industrial West," said to be this book's special focus. The Introduction sets out the central thesis: secularization occurs at different levels and in different contexts, but has so far not been closely examined in relation to women's changing roles in western societies, where traditional religiosity survives especially among women most active in the domestic arena. The book thus explores the key paradox that "women are both the most religious *and* are disaffiliating from religion in significant numbers, so much so that their changing social position is seen as a key cause of secularization" (p. 5). The overall research is grounded in the strong belief that women's religious experiences present some important challenges to secularization theories. I would agree with this, although I would consider these challenges as being situated in a much larger, more nuanced, and religiously more diverse context than perceived in some parts of this book.

As always, the amount of material covered remains limited by the research perspectives and experience of the contributors. The first part on Christianity begins with one of the longest and best documented chapters, full of figures and tables wherein Penny Long Marler from Samford University, Alabama, in her essay on "Religious Change in the West: Watch the Women" sets the scene by demonstrating through quantitative analysis how changing family,

social, and work contexts have affected women's participation in traditional church life, a change described as moving "from home-making to self-making." This is an intriguing thesis which deserves wider discussion, although most of her examples are drawn from the USA with some additional reference to religious change in the UK. It is a challenging, wide-ranging analysis which concludes that to understand religious developments in the future, it will remain important to watch the women – a conclusion one cannot but agree with, but which one might like to extend far further by considering the changing participation and roles of women in many other religions around the world.

The three more narrowly focused chapters are much more narrowly focused on empirical investigations of British evangelical women, the sexual selves of young Canadian women in Protestant churches, and Catholic nuns in Poland – a somewhat limited set of examples from the wide ambit of global Christianities where so many particular studies already exist worldwide. For this reason well-informed readers may find the second part of the book on "Alternative Spiritualities" of more interest than the section on Christianity concerned with only a part of the western world.

The opening chapter on "The Spiritual Revolution and the New Age Gender Puzzle: The Sacralization of the Self in Late Modernity (1980-2000)," a keynote lecture at the 2005 Religion and Gender Conference by the Dutch scholars Dick Houtman and Stef Aupers, provides again a substantial, well-documented piece of research concerned with conceptualizing contemporary spirituality and mapping and explaining the so-called "spiritual revolution." Yet however challenging this discussion may be, it also invites a critique of the narrow constraints of sociological conceptualizations of spirituality which often remain totally blind to alternative, and more substantive, theoretical elucidations of this key term in multiple studies of other academic disciplines. Similar reservations can be applied to Linda Woodhead's thoughtful essay on "Religion and Women's Changing Lives in the West" (see ch. 8) that concludes Part II, which contains two other chapters, one on paganism, goddess religion and witchcraft in Canada, the other on new forms of spiritualized Christianity. From a comparative study of religions perspective, the examples chosen remain too particularistic and narrowly constrained by a specifically western and largely Anglo-Saxon point of view. It seems that the research of the "Kendal Project," carried out some years ago by staff at Lancaster University into what is after all a very small population in a local area of northern England, has to bear a very heavy conceptual and theoretical load relating to holistic and alternative spiritualities. Could the same large generalizations be equally supported by data from France, Italy, Spain or the Nordic countries, or from Catholic population groups in the USA or other western regions?

It is refreshing therefore to read in Part III about studies of Muslim women dealing with the relationship between religion and modernity from a different angle. Here again the focus is on particular communities with data on Muslim women in Britain, the USA, Canada, and in the much less familiar city of Kazan in the autonomous republic of Tatarstan within the Russian Federation.

These essays provide a good foundation for developing further research and more nuanced theoretical positions that will yet more advance our understanding of the mutual interaction between women, religion and modernity in some parts of the western world. An excellent resource for teaching and research, with extensive bibliographical references and a detailed index, this book can be highly recommended.