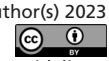
EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF Cultural Studies

Article

European Journal of Cultural Studies
1–18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A feminism of the soul? Postfeminism, postsecular feminism and contemporary feminine spiritualities

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Abstract

Increasingly popular 'feminine spiritualities' urge women to foster personal transformation and social change through spiritual empowerment and healing of 'the feminine'. However, in spite of feminist undertones, feminism is rarely explicitly evoked, and is often even rejected. Gender scholars have debated over the ambivalent feminism of contemporary spiritualities, which are readily seen as closer to postfeminist rather than feminist ideals, or framed as a form of old-fashioned cultural feminism. While some recent analyses do explore the feminist potential of feminine spiritualities in more positive terms, the debates often lack practitioner perspectives on feminism and deeper considerations of the practitioners' own self-definitions. Based on ethnographic interview material across Finnish and Anglo-American contexts, this article explores how adherents of feminine spirituality imagine feminism, and whether they consider their spirituality to be feminist or not and why. I argue that while practitioners hold varying, often ambiguous positions in relation to feminism, the narratives iterate shared themes that render feminism and feminine spirituality as incompatible: an emphasis on femininity over feminism, and a focus on spirituality instead of politics. Furthermore, practitioners critique mainstream feminism for being too secular, while often simultaneously agreeing with feminist criticisms of both cultural feminist and postfeminist ideals. I suggest that failing to take the voices of spiritual women into account prevents constructive dialogue and solidarity among secular and spiritual feminists as well as non-feminist women, and offers little room for emerging postsecular feminist identities.

Keywords

Affect, femininity, haunting, narrative analysis, postfeminism, postsecular feminism, spirituality

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Introduction: feminism, popular spirituality and the postsecular

> I like to think of goddess practice as a form of sacred feminism – not political feminism but feminism of the soul. To my generation, feminism was not only a movement for woman's economic and political equality. It also involved a deep and fearless self-exploration, a commitment to looking beyond our conditioned assumptions about masculine and feminine. That exploration got lost in a kind of backlash in the 1980s and 1990s, but young women are again exploring those questions, even as neuroscience is coming to understand the differences between a male and female brain. One of the great questions that sacred feminism looks at is: what is true feminine power?
>
> (Kempton, 2013: 11).

This quote from the renowned American yoga teacher Sally Kempton exemplifies a popular claim within holistic spirituality that 'the feminine' is on the rise. Women are increasingly called to move towards a more balanced world through a feminine spiritual orientation, and by awakening a 'new era of sisterhood' (Campbell, 2016: xv). Women's circles, spiritual retreats and self-help manuals invite women to heal their feminine energy, and to empower themselves by releasing their inner Goddess and finding their true feminine power. These 'feminine spiritualities' encompass various forms of holistic spirituality[1] that are targeted to women, stress the divine feminine and are adapted to the alleged specificity of the female body and feminine spiritual experience.

Fused with feminist undertones, feminine spiritualities intend not only to empower individual women, but also to change what is considered an overtly masculine society. However, the relationship between feminism and contemporary feminine spiritualities is complex. While second-wave cultural feminism was historically connected to the rise of alternative, women-centred spiritualities celebrating feminine divinity (Eller, 1993), contemporary feminine spirituality is rarely explicitly feminist. In addition, spiritual women frequently view feminism in negative terms (Longman, 2018: 12; Plancke, 2021: 741). The ambivalent feminism within contemporary feminine spiritualities is captured in Kempton's (2013) illustration of women's interest in spirituality as a new phase of feminism – a feminism of the soul.

Furthermore, the female-dominated field of holistic spirituality remains a difficult issue for feminists. Gender scholars have been puzzled by the question of whether holistic spirituality is feminist or not (Balizet and Myers, 2016; Crowley, 2011: 149, 166), and readily see it as closer to postfeminist rather than feminist ideals (Balizet and Myers, 2016; Jain, 2020; Kolehmainen, 2018: 71–73). Critiques of postfeminism have been concerned with the way in which the popularity of feminist discourses threatens feminism's critical edge (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009), and the increasingly commercialised field of spirituality has likewise been accused of colonising various counter discourses, including feminism (Jain, 2020: 41). However, feminine spiritualities have been criticised for being separatist and old-fashioned forms of cultural feminism promoting essentialist and universalised conceptions of womanhood (Bobel, 2010; Danuta-Walters, 1985). Studies suggest that while practitioners of feminine spiritualities are often hesitant to self-identify as feminists (Longman, 2018: 12), feminists are slightly more inclined towards alternative spiritualities than the average population (Aune, 2011).

Moreover, the postsecular turn in feminism has invited feminists to question the secular underpinnings of Western feminism, and to rethink the role of spirituality in emancipatory politics (Braidotti, 2008). Nevertheless, Kempton, as quoted above, deliberately separates her notion of sacred feminism from its 'political' counterparts, inviting us to ponder the relationship between contemporary spiritualities and feminism. Why do spiritual women find feminism problematic, and what is imagined to be different about feminine spirituality or 'sacred feminism'? This article contributes to the discussions around the entanglements and shifts of meaning related to gender, the spiritual and religious, and feminism in an era that is both postsecular and postfeminist.

Feminist discussions of the postsecular have mainly addressed the question of the Muslim Other (Bracke, 2008; Mahmood, 2006; Scott, 2018), and rarely deal with the spiritual agency of Western spiritual women engaged with the relatively liberal field of holistic spiritualities (exceptions Longman, 2018; Plancke, 2021). Moreover, what is lacking in the debates over the feminist leanings of contemporary spirituality, are practitioner perspectives on feminism. When feminism is mentioned, it is defined, and its presence or absence are judged, with relatively little consideration for the practitioners' own self-definitions. By analysing interviews with adherents of feminine spirituality, this article explores how they imagine feminism, whether they consider their spirituality to be feminist or not and why. What kind of stories are told both about feminism and about the sacred? The story of spiritual women's empowerment matters, not least because the 'New Age woman' is both a ridiculed stereotype and a disputed figure – as Karlyn Crowley (2011: 23) writes, she is a figure that critics love to hate. Given her ambivalent feminism, she also lingers at the edges of feminism, making her an interesting case for discussions around postfeminism.

In what follows, I will first outline how the themes of spirituality/religion, gender and feminism have been addressed within feminist and gender scholarship by outlining discussions on postsecular feminism and gender-focused analyses of contemporary spirituality. I will then introduce the ethnographic interview material and methodology of the article. In the analysis, I will suggest that even if practitioners hold different stances towards feminism, the narratives are 'haunted' by feminism, which in the current cultural logic does not easily align with feminine spirituality. Feminism has an 'absent presence' that stems from the cultural construction of both femininity and spirituality as antithetical to feminism. Furthermore, I suggest that the hesitant attitude towards feminism can be seen as a critique – rather than a celebration – of postfeminist ideals of femininity, as well as a disillusionment with the secularism of mainstream feminism.

Postsecular feminisms and spiritual femininities

Feminist scholarship on the postsecular has, on one hand, posed critiques against the instrumentalisation of feminism as a tool in racist and neoconservative undertakings. Joan Scott (2018), among others, has criticised the way in which the 'clash of civilisations' rhetoric discursively equates secularisation with progress, constructing an idea of the liberal and gender equal West against Islam as the allegedly oppressive Other. Feminists have pointed out that the idea of gender equality as inherent to the logic of secularism is historically false (Scott, 2018), and called for a disarticulation between secularism and modernity (Bracke, 2008: 59).

On the other hand, postsecular feminist perspectives have questioned the secular presumptions of Western feminism itself by calling for the recognition of religious or spiritual motivations behind women's (political) agency and by aiming to rethink the role of spirituality regarding feminist thought and practice. Feminists and feminist political theorists have been criticised for aligning with secularism (Braidotti, 2008) and posing religious women as passive and oppressed victims of false consciousness (Bracke, 2008: 61). Scholars such as Saba Mahmood (2006) and Sarah Bracke (2008) have pointed out that feminist notions of agency and subjectivity follow a secular-liberal logic, which fails to make sense of the lives and agency of religious women. While sympathetic to the mistrust of religion as a force of oppression, some feminists maintain that overlooking religion or spirituality is an unhelpful stance. Instead, it is argued that we need to make '*better* religion, not anti-religion' (Arora, 2018: 35, emphasis in original), and reclaim the sacred from forces that colonise and distort it for oppressive aims (Fernandes, 2003: 11, 14).

Hence, as Nandini Deo (2018) summarises, '[p]ostsecular feminism destabilizes assumptions about the subject of feminism and the role of choice and agency and invites us to broaden our empathetic imaginations' (p. 2). However, this empathy is seldom directed towards women within holistic spirituality. Even scholars who call for the re-enchantment of political aspirations are often hasty to detach it from its 'quirky ''New Age'' fantas[ies]' (Fernandes, 2003: 21). Holistic spirituality has often been dismissed as apolitical (Crowley, 2011: 30) and closely entangled with neoliberal market logics (Jain, 2020) and the ideals of self-responsible entrepreneurial subjectivity (Altglas, 2014). Nonetheless, contemporary spiritualities attract women as a means for personal empowerment as well as societal change.

In general, the field of holistic spirituality is gendered: it is dominated by women both as practitioners and providers of spiritual services, and it is entwined with practices and attributes that are traditionally assigned to femininity, such as care, empathy, emotion and acceptance (Sointu, 2012: 72–73). While holistic spirituality has been described as women-friendly and empowering, scholars of religion and gender have been concerned with the types of normative femininities the field reproduces (Altglas, 2014: 263–267; Fedele and Knibbe, 2013: 9–10, 2016: 197). Femininity continues to be a difficult issue for feminists (Dahl, 2011), and is culturally constructed as incompatible with feminism (Scharff, 2011). Hence, when discussing the feminist leanings of feminine spiritualities, its explicit emphasis on femininity appears to be a central source of friction. In feminist critiques towards the 'feminism' of holistic spirituality, two contested femininities and related feminisms appear as targets: the traditional and essentialist womanhood of the old-fashioned 'spiritual feminist' (Bobel, 2010; Danuta-Walters, 1985) and the modern, autonomous and self-responsible postfeminist femininity of the yoga girl (Balizet and Myers, 2016; Jain, 2020).

Feminine spirituality, in particular, has been criticised by feminists for promoting traditional notions of womanhood and women's roles. By emphasising and seeking to revalue women's experiences and bodily cycles through ascribing them with spiritual meaning, feminine spiritualities have been criticised for glorifying and sacralising biological essentialism (Danuta-Walters, 1985: 30), and reinforcing the valorisation of women's reproductive role (Bobel, 2010: 92). While feminine spiritualities are in these

readings acknowledged as 'feminist spirituality', its subject is presented as clinging to an old-fashioned form of cultural feminism that is separatist and universalises notions of womanhood.

Mainstream yoga and holistic spirituality, on the contrary, have been criticised for promoting individualist methods for empowerment that celebrate individual achievement and reduce structural issues to individual problems. Yoga is claimed to appear as feminist by stressing empowerment, freedom and acceptance and by acknowledging (sexual) abuse and trauma, while actually guiding women to take responsibility for their own empowerment through individual transformation, autonomy and personal healing (Balizet and Myers, 2016; Jain, 2020). This postfeminist spiritual female subject is manifested in the image of the 'yoga girl', whom Ariane Balizet and Whitney Myers (2016: 280–281) describe as a slim, white, able-bodied female practitioner who is both empowered and independent while conforming to traditional standards of beauty. Aligning with postfeminist 'competitive femininity' (McRobbie, 2015), the yoga girl ideal is claimed to suggest that personal success from promotions to perfect handstands is a 'result of hard work and discipline' completely detached from structural barriers (Balizet and Myers, 2016: 279).

Postfeminist culture is characterised by an individualistic celebration of women's choice, empowerment and professional success, coupled with an increasing call for self-surveillance, self-discipline and a re-traditionalisation of ideas about gender (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). Reclaiming femininity and sexuality is central to postfeminist subjectivity, the implicit message being that femininity has been taken away by feminist political correctness and puritanism (McRobbie, 2009: 12, 17, 21). Indeed, the power gained through mainstream yoga does not occur at the cost of normative femininity: the yoga girl 'may be strong – very strong – because she is also very sexy' (Balizet and Myers, 2016: 282). In celebrating femininity and sexuality, the field of therapeutic spirituality has also been accused of turning from sexual objectification to postfeminist subjectification (Kolehmainen, 2018: 73). It is suggested that while discourses of self-realisation present holistic spiritualities as a means of free individual self-expression, it's neoliberal imperative for self-improvement may, in fact, involve a seemingly voluntary accommodation to pre-existing and often traditional ideals of gendered selfhood (Altglas, 2014: 267).

In contrast, sociological and ethnographic perspectives to holistic spiritualities have suggested they help women to negotiate conflicting, traditional and new gender ideals and offer new representations of femininity in increasingly individualised and de-traditionalised societies (Fedele and Knibbe, 2016: 203; Sointu and Woodhead, 2008). Eeva Sointu and Linda Woodhead (2008: 268–270) argue that holistic spirituality both legitimates traditional feminine practices of emotional and bodily care, and subverts traditional notions of femininity by stressing care of the self and offering autonomous modes of selfhood. In a more critical tone, Veronique Altglas (2014) suggests that instead of empowering women in a de-traditionalised society, the sacralisation of femininity in fact re-traditionalises gender and locks women in subordinate roles as caretakers (pp. 265–266).

Nevertheless, recent studies on feminine spiritualities suggest that both postfeminist and essentialist readings are too simplifying. Chia Longman (2018: 10) and Carine

Plancke (2021: 740–741) indicate that feminine spiritualities criticise rather than celebrate postfeminist ideals of beauty, neoliberal subjectivity and work ethic. For example, by tuning into the female body and it's cycles, practitioners of 'womb yoga' challenge contemporary ideals of mainstream yogic presentation, female success and the demands of working life (Plancke, 2021: 737–738). Moreover, centring the womb does not simply reproduce the traditional role of motherhood, since notions of care are associated with wider meanings of creativity (Plancke, 2021: 741).

While these analyses suggest that the current context of re-vitalised and popularised feminine spiritualities might hold some 'feminist potential', how practitioners understand feminism is not elaborated upon, nor are the kind of assumptions and experiences that lie behind these understandings. Plancke (2021) suggests that her informants were 'sympathetic' to feminism, but critical to mainstream 'liberal equality feminism' (p. 741) that expects women to act like men. Longman (2018: 12) again found that most practitioners did not see themselves nor their women's circling practice as feminist. In this article, I will unpack these ambivalent connections further by exploring what lies behind the negative and hesitant attitudes of spiritual women towards feminism.

Researching narratives of spirituality, the feminine and feminism

This article is based on 20 in-depth interviews with practitioners of feminine spirituality, conducted as a part of a wider multi-sited ethnographic research project on feminine spiritualities across Finnish and Anglo-American contexts. Some informants were located and contacted through the Internet and others recruited during fieldwork while attending spiritual courses and retreats, as well as through snowballing. My participants were engaged in and often combined spiritual practices ranging from yoga and tantra to shamanism, goddess spirituality, Taoism and angel spirituality – re-interpreted from a 'feminine perspective'. Hence, the shared focus of the feminine appears as a central defining feature of these spiritual practices, and also serves to connect practitioners from different spiritual backgrounds for example in shared events.

While the majority of the interviewees were women, two identified (at least partly) as genderqueer or fluid. Eleven were based in Finland, but some of them had been living outside of Finland and many recounted attending spiritual events abroad either in person or online. The remaining nine interviewees were located in an anglophone context. The majority of them were American, but two had other nationalities and/or were based outside of the United States. However, they offered spiritual services to an English-speaking clientele and were reached through my American contacts, thus forming a transnational spiritual field where influences and networks often cross geographical boundaries (Fedele and Knibbe, 2013). Most participants were 'spiritual professionals' – working, for example, as holistic counsellors, spiritual mentors, yoga teachers or healers – while some were attendants at events I attended during fieldwork. All participants were white and of Euro-American descent, except for one Peruvian woman of mixed descent. All participants are pseudonymised. Interview extracts are somewhat edited to improve readability, and the Finnish extracts are translated by the author.

This article analyses the narratives about feminism that are outlined in the interviews. I focus on the stories of selected interviewees that serve to illuminate wider common themes in the research material. While my participants talked extensively about the feminine, feminism often had a presence that can, in Angela McRobbie's (2004: 257–260) terms, be described as 'spectral'. Feminism was often implicitly alluded to through references to gender relations, women's empowerment and societal change, but also left hanging in the air or consciously repudiated. While participants related to feminism in multiple ways, a hesitancy marked most of the material. Roughly a half dis-identified from feminism, and while the other half would at least to some extent relate to feminism, few would do so without hesitation. As Elina, a Finnish woman in her early 40s, stated after some consideration: 'like purely I'm not a feminist'. Feminism is imagined to have some kind of clear boundaries that are broken, since Elina maintains that if she identified as a feminist (she was not sure), her feminism would somehow be 'impure'.

Instead of trying to come to a conclusion about whether or not feminine spiritualities are feminist, I use 'haunting' as a methodological tool to investigate how feminism is present in the field of contemporary spiritualities, and what kind of affective attachments and detachments it evokes. Avery Gordon (2008: 7) describes haunting as 'a paradigmatic way in which life is more complicated than those of us who study it have usually granted', and maintains that '[t]o study social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it'. The relationship between feminism and contemporary spirituality is certainly more complicated than the question 'feminist or not' allows for. I suggest that whether explicitly identified with feminism or not, feminine spiritualities are haunted by it. This haunting takes many shapes from implicit employments of feminist discourses or practices and conscious re-workings of understandings of feminism to deliberate and constitutive rejections of feminism.

The 'feminist or not' question does not only expect a simple relation to feminism, but also assumes that there's something simple to relate to – feminism. Hence, feminism's spectral existence acquires a second dimension. Because it is impossible to talk about just one form of feminism, and because we often still do, I treat feminism as a ghostly figure that appears in cultural narratives as a recognisable entity, despite its lack of clear boundaries or stable essence. Gordon (2008) writes that the stories people tell about themselves, their society and the problems they face 'are entangled and weave between what is immediately available as a story and what their imaginations are reaching towards' (p. 4). I suggest that in the interviews, feminism appears available as a story (or as a figure in a story), and is used by my participants as a means to tell stories about themselves and their social worlds. Sometimes their imaginations also reach towards a different feminism.

Hence, stories of spiritual women seem to be stories of feminism whether the woman is included/includes herself or not. As Claire Hemmings (2011) writes, the stories we tell about feminism matter 'because of the ways in which they intersect with wider institutionalisations of gendered meanings' (p. 1). How do stories of spiritual feminism connect to wider cultural processes of individualisation, therapeuticisation, neoliberalisation and postsecularisation, and their gendered nature? How can we as academic feminists tell stories about spiritual women without contributing to the trivialisation of women's spirituality? Moreover, as Sara Ahmed (2017) suggests, the stories of how we become

feminists also matter, and since as gender-related insights result from 'coming up against the world' (p. 19), it is also not irrelevant what kind of a world we come up against.

I suggest that even if practitioners positioned themselves towards feminism in various ways, there are shared themes arising from their narratives about feminism. Here, I will analyse two main themes: (1) an emphasis on the feminine over the feminist and (2) a focus on the spiritual over the political or the activist. By examining these themes, I will ask what kind of a world feminine spiritualities are coming up against, and why there is no room for (political) feminism in that world.

Feminine, not feminist

> To me that word [feminism] has always, or at least earlier, had a bit of a negative connotation (. . .) Unfortunately that word has suffered a bit . . . back in the days because it was necessary to go through the barricades so to speak. (. . .) That's why I don't personally . . . To me it's not natural to use the term feminism.

Jaana, like many other interviewees, suggested that feminism was not a 'natural' word to describe herself. Working as a spiritual entrepreneur organising women's retreats and training in Finland, Jaana maintained that feminism was 'not directly related' to what she was doing, and instead she found the terms 'feminine consciousness' and 'feminine energy' more descriptive of her work. Linda, a Canadian born woman living in Hawaii, similarly maintained she does not describe herself as feminist because it bears 'a lot of connotation'. Instead, for her,

> it will always be about the feminine. It's about honouring and lifting the feminine, and for me that doesn't require me to be anything. It doesn't require me to be a feminist. (. . .) And there are things about feminist practices that I think are just an inverse of patriarchal tools. (. . .) I think there's been some incredible, important and necessary advances thanks to feminist work and I'm grateful for it. And what I'm personally interested in is this small shift of language from feminist to honouring the feminine. Because for me they are two very different things.

Jaana and Linda reject feminism not only because of its 'negative connotations', but by making a distinction between the feminine and the feminist. The difference is presented as a small but significant 'shift of language' from feminist to the feminine. Christina Scharff (2011: 460) has suggested that the cultural and discursive construction of feminism in opposition to normative femininity might be one factor behind the disidentification of women from feminism. She argues that the rejections of feminism as unfeminine are at the same time performances of femininity. Among my participants, even those who would sympathise or identify with feminism emphasised the feminine, and would frequently present it as something other than feminism. Given that contemporary spirituality has been seen to reproduce both postfeminist and essentialist femininities, it is interesting to explore further what kind of femininity feminine spiritualities are shifting towards, and what kind of understandings of feminism is it contrasted against.

Abandoning feminist barricades in favour of honouring the feminine does seem to reproduce a postfeminist rhetoric about the pastness of feminism, a renewed interest in the feminine, and a focus on uplift and empowerment. The postfeminist popularity of

feminist discourses has been framed by gender scholars as a 'happy feminism' that eclipses structural critique (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020: 9), and normalises a positive mental attitude (Gill, 2017). Postfeminist media representations cast feminism as a killjoy, robbing women of their traditional feminine pleasures and conventional desires (Ahmed, 2017; McRobbie, 2004: 262, 2009: 21). Feminism has a ghostly presence as a desire for gender justice and fairness in a world where the ideal postfeminist subject must be independent, self-supporting and self-respecting, while simultaneously remaining funny, not too critical or angry and holding on to her femininity (McRobbie, 2009: 22).

However, the feminine appealed to my informants precisely because they had been living out the postfeminist ideal of a professionally successful, autonomous woman. When describing what the feminine meant to her, Anni, a Finnish woman in her late 30s, started by telling me how she had never thought of herself as a feminist. She had grown up believing that she can become anything as long as she worked for it. She had always been interested in what she hinted were 'masculine' activities, such as athletics or making money through investment and acting as an entrepreneur. Hence, for her

> feminist thought is nothing. But from that results that I've been said that I'm a very tough woman. You know that you only do what you want, that you're tough. Like that the kind of softness that is usually connected to women is missing.

While she indeed repudiates feminism by taking equal opportunities for granted, she did not consider this progress fully positive. Being able to do whatever she wants had made her 'tough', and the femininity she turned towards was an anti-competitive one. Balancing her femininity through feminine spirituality meant she no longer needed to 'push' and proceed 'using one's elbows'.

Similarly, Liisa, a Finnish holistic counsellor, said she did not 'relate to that Western feminism where women are taught to manage' and have learned to become 'equal within a patriarchal system' – a feminism that in her view was personified in the goddess Athena:

> [Athena] was a motherless woman born out of the head of her father Zeus. Completely cold (. . .) So in a way we don't see the toxicity that this kind of Athena woman causes in this society, by joining men, getting on there, and joining the patriarchal system (. . .) In fact as a central maintaining force of patriarchy are this type of women . . . who think of themselves as feminists.

The turn to spiritual femininity portrayed in these narratives is not a turn to the postfeminist yoga girl ideal, but instead stems from a disappointment with postfeminist 'competitive femininity' and the related urge 'to make it to the top "in a man's world"' (McRobbie, 2015: 15). In fact, postfeminist ideals seemed to further feed the negative aura my informants connected to feminism. Furthermore, they felt that to 'fight for some rights all the time' was 'exhausting' (Sofia), and that always being 'in reaction to something' was 'a hard place to be' (Ava). This resonates with earlier findings suggesting that holistic spiritualities articulate critique towards mainstream liberal equality feminism and the masculine values of strength and performance associated with it (Plancke, 2021: 741; Salmenniemi and Kemppainen, 2020). The spiritual feminine is constructed in opposition to what is imagined as a false feminism of the emancipated Western 'Athena women' – a feminism that is too masculine and 'an inverse of patriarchal tools'.

The distaste for feminism was often also directed towards what was conceived as a current misconstruction of its 'original underlying principles' (Venla). Thus participants often hinted at a time when feminism was better, or to the need for other kinds of approaches to societal change. However, even if a nostalgic longing for a past true feminism was present in some narratives, most informants maintained that the turn to the feminine was not about returning to something old. While, for example Jeanette, a Finnish woman in her mid-50s, was willing to consider herself a feminist, working with the feminine was to her not a feminist endeavour. However, she had, together with her spiritual sisters, been planning to compile a 'manifesto' to be sent to the prime minister. At the time of the interview she was planning a Women's Day Zoom event in order to drive the work forward:

> I thought I'd (. . .) invite women who (. . .) work around these issues from this new [divine feminine] perspective. Not that old feminist one because for me that's an opposite (. . .) [For the healthy feminine] there is no us and them but instead we are all one, because she understands that nature is one . . . life is one. So it cannot be an opposing relationship.

When I asked Jeanette to elaborate on what she meant by the feminine way being different from the old feminist way she said:

> Obviously (. . .) the healthy also exists there [in feminism], like the struggle for rights and equality that's sure so in that sense I'm feminist (. . .) working from that perspective and not that one attacks men . . . and creates that division . . . and that's where we come to the spiritual perspective that encompasses love for all, respect for all (. . .) The new comes from a new place, and because of that I have had to begin with my own transformation process to be able to act from a healthy place that is not in opposition.

While feminine spiritualities have been criticised for being separatist, my interviewees often stressed that lifting up the feminine should not occur through 'attacking' or 'forgetting' men or upholding divisions. Jeanette was also concerned by what she considered a counter-reaction among young men 'channelling their hatred of women'. To her, like to many interviewees, the feminine stood for a healthy way of relating not only to oneself but also to others. Feminism, on the contrary, appeared limited in this respect. As Ava, one of my American participants, put it:

> I identify as a feminist and I also am aware of the limits of feminism. Or again like what's the next evolution (. . .) where we're including everyone, like also including white men of privilege. Where we're really including them and creating less binaries. (. . .) You know there's this term like postfeminist right now and I'm like . . . I don't think we're postfeminist yet. (. . .) I'm all about holding something bigger, (. . .) something mutual, generative, like this partnership based piece. Yeah how can we be in really powerful collaborative relationship with everyone, all genders.

While Ava had, in a questionnaire I asked her to fill out in advance, ticked the option 'woman' to describe her gender, in the interview she said she'd recently started to identify as genderqueer. However, she offered her spiritually informed sexuality education to

women and 'people with vulvas'. Spirituality seemed to appeal because it offered a promise away from social polarisation in a world where the popularisation of feminism occurs in parallel to increasing misogyny (Gill, 2017). Feminisms alleged anti-men position was frequently seen as too reactionary, leaving men out and confining the feminine to the sphere of women alone. Hence, despite the women-only spaces and women-oriented nature of the practices, practitioners of feminine spiritualities remained critical of the separatism they connected to feminism. Instead, their spiritual work aimed towards building constructive relationships across differences.

A spiritual feminism?

Even if Ava was certain about her feminist identity throughout the interview, she also discussed a 'next evolution' of feminism, indicating a need for feminism to progress. However, Ava was also careful not to buy into simple postfeminist abandonments of feminism. Elaborating on what she meant by 'the limits of feminism' she explained:

> Both in conversations I've had with spiritual communities and more of the academic people it can be alienating for some reason for certain people. You know like feminism I guess in some ways has a quote on quote bad name or people think it's exclusive. This is interesting because René [a friend and spiritual colleague] and I actually many many years ago were having this discussion about (. . .) the fourth wave of feminism that we saw coming through in this weaving of spirituality and political activism. And so there's a small group of us all spiritually oriented that formed to have this discussion, and many of the other women said they didn't identify as feminist and that blew my mind.

Growing up, Ava 'would just think (. . .) every woman is a feminist', and so the negative attitude towards feminism among spiritual women came as a considerable surprise. Eventually, she suggested that 'we probably just . . . need to or will grow out of that term', and called for 'something that can hold something bigger' and that is more 'organically created', 'responsive' and 'expansive'. Hence, she was also hesitant towards feminism because it failed to appeal to all women, especially if they are 'spiritually oriented'.

While many practitioners did not see their spirituality in feminist terms, a few pointed towards visions of a spiritualised feminism. Ava called this the fourth wave feminism, which she described as

> this piece where spirituality was a part of feminism. (. . .) And I'm like reclaiming some aspects of femininity or being a woman that were often kind of separated out from feminism or weren't part of the image of feminism. What a lot of people would call the feminine energy, right? And fusing that into feminism.

While Ava herself found the term 'feminine energy' exclusive of trans and nonbinary experiences and hence no longer employed it in her own work, she did see a need to fuse the so-called 'feminine energy' to feminism. This repeats the idea of feminism and femininity as mutually exclusive, but in a way that also calls for their fusion. However, what is to be fused into feminism is not just any notion of the feminine, but

the spiritual concept of feminine energy. For my informants, the hoped-for 'turn' was not just to the feminine, but to feminine spirituality in particular. Thus, the hesitancy towards feminism was also rooted in a conception of feminism and political activism as too secular and rational.

This is also apparent in Liisa's critique of what she termed white or Western feminism embodied in the rationalised figure of Athena. While dis-identifying from this rational or secular notion of feminism, she told me she 'rests' in the 'indigenous feminism' of Native Americans. She said:

> Our entire thinking is so rigid and small compared to what our mind really is and how we can see and experience. And somehow in these indigenous . . . activists and people just when you hear how they talk and how they describe Western thinking, like from the outside, something just like breaks . . . some structures within oneself.

Indigenous feminism appealed to Liisa – who herself was white – because it represented an anti-rational approach, suggesting that there is no room for enchantment in mainstream feminism. This echoes postsecular feminist critiques that challenge the false universalism of the white, Western secular-liberal feminist perspective, and criticise the tendency of feminist commentaries to secularise or overlook the role of spirituality in the work of writers such as bell hooks and Gloria Anzaldúa (Arora, 2018: 49; Fernandes, 2003: 41, footnote 24). An appeal to indigenous rather than white feminism by no means implies that the dominantly white field of feminine spirituality has successfully addressed racial inequalities. Indeed, racial justice advocate Layla Saad (2020) has criticised spiritual white women for tokenism, while engaging in cultural appropriation and failing to see their complicity in white privilege. However, Liisa's case shows how the rationalist and atheist position of especially European feminism (Braidotti, 2008: 3) may be an additional element feeding spiritual women's distaste towards feminism. Furthermore, her contact with indigenous feminism had in fact inspired her to conduct research on the history of colonialism for a book she was writing.

René, an American woman on the brink of 50, strongly identified as feminist, and even thought of her spirituality in feminist terms. However, she experienced difficulty concerning being 'out' as a spiritual person:

> My spirituality is something that I publicly go back and forth with and how open I am and I'm very mindful as well you know in certain groups. For a while when I was involved in the UN and the UN Foundation I mean I did bring it out there and I was always surprised about the receptivity. But I was also cautious.

René's hesitancy to allow her spirituality to be 'out there' reflects the narrowness of the secular norms experienced in contemporary societies and expressed by several interviewees; secular norms that cast women's spirituality as plain nonsense. While feminine spirituality was crucial to René's visions of societal change, she had often kept it in the background because she was concerned about the public reception. Scholars studying contemporary women's religiosity have suggested that women's spiritual experiences

remain unrecognised both within mainstream religious communities and secular social bodies. Terhi Utriainen (2017: 168–169) compares the othering and condemnation of women's angel experiences to the closeting of sexual and gender minorities. She maintains that while many women engaged in angel spirituality identify with Christianity, they live their religion outside or in the shadows of institutionalised religion. Furthermore, Alka Arora (2018: 34) argues that the materialist worldview of secular feminism functions to closet spiritual feminisms. Hence, women's 'alternative' religious experiences do not fit the norms of religious experience as defined by mainstream religious institutions, but neither do they find space in secular modernity, where the supernatural simply does not exist (Utriainen, 2017: 192–193).

Arora (2018: 34–35) calls for a postsecular feminism that challenges the supposed neutrality of secular materialism, and that recognises and amplifies anti-patriarchal and liberatory spiritual and religious narratives. She suggests that mainstream Western feminist thought has placed insufficient attention on the ways in which spiritual experiences can provoke oppositional consciousness. Indeed, René told me that as young adult she was unsure about her stance towards feminism. She believed this was due to the 'benefits' she received from patriarchy as a successful and athletic white woman from a respected family. While René had been trained in government politics and was building a career in journalism and political administration, her feminist consciousness was not raised until she found spirituality:

> Then, (. . .) when the blinders started to come off and once I had my divine feminine spiritual awakening, I'd say it wasn't until then, you know, my mid thirties that I really identified as a feminist. And that was because that's when I saw really the destruction that the patriarchal system had caused for women and girls.

While spiritual white women are certainly not othered in similar ways to women with other racial backgrounds, and while their engagement in holistic spiritualities is not unproblematic, Liisa's and René's stories show that spirituality may also provoke awareness of race and racism.

René's turn to spirituality was motivated by the search for 'something more' than the life of a successful young career woman, but also by a disillusionment in a life in politics, which she felt was 'cut-throat divisive' and therefore she eventually abandoned. 'In a way I am politically active now', she maintained,

> but in a in a whole different way. I mean it's not the traditional path you know. Had I stayed on the traditional path who knows if I ever would have had a feminine awakening, right? (. . .) My intuitive sense is I'm gonna be back into the political world and, you know, [be] a leader there in some way but . . . You know intellectually, logistically I can't even picture how those dots connect.

René's story reflects the opposition of spirituality and politics as somehow incompatible. Politics was something she had stepped away from when pursuing a spiritual path, and even if she had an 'intuitive sense' of going back she was not sure how the two would fit together. However, Suvi Salmenniemi (2019: 411) has argued that the therapeutic

milieu of holistic spiritualities are deemed unpolitical because of a narrow conception of politics. This is reflected in the way René maintained she was not unpolitical now, just political in a different way.

The shift from the feminist to the feminine as a focus on 'inner transformation' in order to 'act from a healthy place' (Jeanette) can be seen as a de-politicising effect: a turn from structural critique towards individual empowerment and personal healing. Feminists have concerned whether this inner empowerment is ever directed outwards (Crowley, 2011: 149–150). Andrea Jain has argued that part of the appeal of popular spirituality comes from the employment of countercultural and subversive rhetorics that challenge the dominant order. However, she maintains that this subversion is merely gestural, visible in yoga-wear slogans but void of concrete actions and platforms for protest (Jain, 2020: 6–8). Nevertheless, my participants frequently believed their spiritual work was in support of a wider societal shift towards feminine values. For example, Jaana called for a 'paradigm shift' and implied that spiritual values and aspirations should not remain 'beautiful thoughts' but should be 'incorporated into current structures'.

Many interviewees were invested in bringing about societal change through the encouragement of 'feminine leadership'. According to René, this was not about women 'leading from the patriarchal foundation' but 'has basis in feminine spirituality':

> To me that [feminine leadership] speaks to more partnership model, collaboration, looking at the whole, you know, how can we be of service to the whole and not just to the few. I think that's a big element of feminine leadership. (. . .) Like how can we create more wellness in this community, in this school, in this organisation, in this state, in this nation, right? That's what it's based on whereas the patriarchal model I believe is more based on how can we keep control and that squeezes the heck out of everyone else.

No longer involved in politics, René now strives for social change as a women's leadership coach by creating and teaching what she pictured as more ethical and sustainable ways of leadership; a leadership that is based on collaboration and empathy, rather that pushing through the masculine 'power over' model. She also portrayed a feminine leader as someone who carefully listens to her own well-being and does not push for accomplishments.

Scholars have noted that contemporary religion and spirituality in many cases intersects with and supports neoliberal and postfeminist work life ideals. Prosperity gospel discourses that equate financial and professional success with faith and godliness, for example, are harnessed within network marketing organisations in order to invite women to uncritically embrace precarious work life conditions (Sullivan and Delaney, 2017). Holistic spiritualities again function as resources for developing emotional and professional skills required in uncertain and competitive professional environments (Altglas, 2014: 300–306). However, the spiritual femininity promoted in feminine spiritualities suggest a more complex picture. While the call for feminine leadership does seem to place responsibility on individual leaders, it also challenges the ethos of individualism and personal capability. Once more, spiritual feminine leadership is detached from postfeminist competitive femininity and the neoliberal feminist call to 'lean in' and vigorously pursue

one's individual goals (Rottenberg, 2014: 422, 426). By training feminine leaders, René's spiritual feminism was steered towards bringing about changes in work culture.

Conclusion

The postsecular era is characterised by the close entanglement of neoliberalism and religion, where new forms of 'neoliberal religion', to quote Matthew Guest (2022), 'emerge from and embody an engagement with neoliberal social conditions' (p. 7). Moreover, contemporary holistic spirituality has been framed as 'neoliberal spirituality' and a postfeminist 'self-love club' dovetailing with neoliberal interests (Jain, 2020). However, the aim of this article was to show how the engagement of feminine spiritualities with neoliberal culture is not a simple embodiment – but also a resistance – of neoliberal and postfeminist ideals and discourses.

By looking at the ways in which feminism is portrayed in the narratives of spiritual women, this article has analysed the ways in which feminine spiritualities align with both spiritual postfeminism and postsecular feminism; however, it does neither of these in a straight-forward sense. Feminism acquires a spectral presence in the sense that, because of the emphasis of the feminine, feminism is cast into the shadows. In its rejection, feminism becomes present through its absence: feminine spirituality is often articulated through claims that it is not feminism or is something more than or different to feminism. However, the femininity uplifted in feminine spiritualities diverge from postfeminist celebrations of femininity. The world of neoliberal work ethic and competitive, performance-oriented femininity is precisely the world that feminine spiritualities 'come up against'. Instead of mere postfeminist individualism, the turn to the feminine and feminine models of leadership also emphasise values such as collectivity, downshifting and striving for less. This reveals a disillusionment with the current demands of the present neoliberal culture, which, in the interview narratives, are coupled with understandings of feminism. The rejection of feminism can therefore be interpreted as a rejection of postfeminist ideals, which have become the new normal (Gill, 2017).

Even when feminism is embraced by my participants, they wish to shine a spiritualised light on it, suggesting that within mainstream feminism, spirituality is cast into the shadows. While feminine spiritualities have also been criticised for clinging to a 'backward' cultural feminism, what is highlighted by many participants is a perceived need for feminism's 'next evolution', not a return to previous models. Even if feminine spiritualities centre around femininity and female embodiment and include women only events, they remain critical of the separatism they connect to feminism and the current political polarisation. Hence, the fusing of feminine energy into feminism seems to take distance both from postfeminist and cultural feminist ideals. While this article has focused on exploring the notions spiritual women have of feminism, more research is needed in the future on the alternative practices of spiritual empowerment and social change suggested by practitioners of feminine spiritualities.

However, I suggest that constructions of the feminine and the feminist, as well as the spiritual and the political, as mutually exclusive foster spiritual women's hesitancy towards feminism. This makes it difficult for new spiritual feminist identities to arise and be noticed, preventing constructive dialogue. The risk is that spiritual women's insights regarding, for

example, the value of spirituality in individual lives, social relationships as well as in political aspirations and acts of resistance, are excluded from feminist conversations. Moreover, it might prevent feminist insights regarding the structural nature of problems such as racism to be fully incorporated into spiritual women's efforts to create a more just world beyond mere 'beautiful thoughts'. Hence, for feminism to become postsecular, it could be worthwhile to widen our empathetic imaginations towards spiritual women within the liberal Western context, and their desire to enchant their lives as well as their feminism.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research has been funded by The Donner Institute for Research into Religion and Culture and by the University of Turku.

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Note

1. By holistic spirituality, I mean a wide range of alternative spiritualities and healing modalities that have often also been named New Age spirituality. However, the term 'New Age' often bears negative cultural stereotypes and is avoided by some spiritual practitioners. Hence, I prefer to use the term 'holistic spirituality' unless specifically addressing the cultural stereotypes of New Age spirituality and the New Age woman.

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