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**Aune, K.**

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## FEMINIST SPIRITUALITY AS LIVED RELIGION:

### How UK Feminists Forge Religio-Spiritual Lives

KRISTIN AUNE<sup>1</sup>

Coventry University, United Kingdom

*How do feminists in the United Kingdom view spirituality and religion? What are their religious and spiritual attitudes, beliefs, and practices? What role do spirituality and religion play in feminists' lives? This article presents findings from an interview-based study of thirty feminists in England, Scotland, and Wales. It identifies three characteristics of feminists' approaches to religion and spirituality: They are de-churched, are relational, and emphasize practice. These features warrant a new approach to feminists' relationships with religion and spirituality. Rather than, as others have done, equating feminism with secularism, secularization, or alternative spiritualities, the article reveals the complex ways feminists forge religio-spiritual lives. The interview data demonstrate that it is unwise to see "spirituality" and "religion" as analytically distinct. Instead, drawing on the growing field of scholarship on "lived religion," the article proposes conceptualizing feminist spirituality as lived religion.*

**Keywords:** *feminist, religion, religious, spiritual, gender*

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How do feminists in the United Kingdom view spirituality and religion? What are their religious or spiritual attitudes, beliefs, and practices? What role do spirituality and religion play in feminists' lives? This article presents findings from an interview-based study of thirty feminists. It identifies three characteristics of feminists' religio-spiritual approaches: they are de-churched, are relational, and emphasize practice. These features, I argue, call for a new approach to feminists' relationship to religion and spirituality, so I propose conceptualizing feminist spirituality as lived religion.

Just as feminisms are diverse and the term "feminism" is continually interrogated, defining "religion" and "spirituality" has preoccupied scholars for over a century. Sociologists of religion have taken two broad approaches. *Substantive definitions* seek to interrogate what religion *is*: its essence or substance. Belief in something otherworldly is emphasized, often one or more deities who govern or intervene in the world. Tylor (1873), for instance, held that religion was "belief in Spiritual Beings." *Functional definitions* explain what religion *does*: its function in society, for instance, providing a worldview that helps people cope with questions of meaning, or bringing people together in worship. Luckmann's (1967, 49) notion of religion as "the transcendence of biological nature by the human organism" is a well-known functional definition.

For most scholars, "spirituality" is an aspect of religion. But in post-industrial contexts, some argue that non-institutional spiritualities deserve attention apart from "religion." Observing that many people refer to themselves as "spiritual but not religious," some have taken this "emic" (insider) notion of spirituality and made it an "etic" (outsider) one too (Vincett and Woodhead 2009; Wuthnow 2001).

However, a group of scholars have begun employing the term "lived religion" to encompass religion *and* spirituality. Like them, I use "spirituality," "religion," and "religio-spiritual" interchangeably when discussing feminists' approaches (see McGuire 2008, 6). I

believe distinguishing religion from spirituality is unhelpful analytically and does not reflect the narratives of the feminists interviewed for this study. While some of them viewed spirituality as more open and indeterminate than religion (religion connoting a misogynistic institution), others thought differently, experiencing spirituality within religion, seeing no need for either, or possessing a spiritual worldview interpretable (cf. Luckmann 1967) as religious in itself. Their experiences cannot be differentiated as *either* religious *or* spiritual. But treating the terms as synonymous does not obfuscate the need for discussion of the light my findings shed on how to define religion and spirituality. So after outlining characteristics of feminists' religio-spiritual approaches, I will suggest that the concept of lived religion captures their approaches well, and will prove influential in taking forward analysis of religion in late modern societies.

## **FEMINIST SOCIOLOGICAL LITERATURE ON RELIGION**

This research speaks to three themes in feminist sociological literature on religion. The first equates feminism with secularism and secularization. The second links feminism to women's turn to alternative forms of spirituality. The third concerns religious feminisms. These trajectories are partly chronological – they move historically from a “feminism vs. religion” position to the feminist turn to spirituality and then to religious feminisms – but they are also overlapping discourses about religion that continue to be articulated in academic literature.

### **Feminism vs. religion: secularism and secularization**

As women's and gender studies developed from the 1970s, its scholars often portrayed religion negatively, as an obstacle to feminism. In women's movement histories and feminist texts, religion is either absent or treated negatively, as a patriarchal impediment

to liberation (Braude 2004; Llewellyn and Trzebiatowska 2013). Consequently, the study of religion is at best a marginal field within gender studies; the study of gender in the sociology of religion is also relatively new (Woodhead 2001). This neglect of religion betrays secularist assumptions (that gender equality is antithetical to religion, and that religions should not be given power in the public sphere to control women's lives), Reilly (2011) and Mahmood (2005) argue, secularist assumptions that derive partly from liberal feminism's genesis in the Enlightenment rejection of non-scientific meta-narratives. Liberal feminist views of agency as autonomy and resistance to patriarchal norms often contradict religious understandings of agency (Mahmood 2005). Feminism's secularist assumptions derive also from feminism's socialist or Marxist inheritance, wherein religion is rejected as a form of false consciousness blinding women to their oppression or teaching that freedom is for a utopian afterlife (Braidotti 2008).

Many social theorists, like feminists, consider modernity the antithesis of religion. Secularization theorists argue that modernization brought about democracy, egalitarianism, and religion's demise (Wilson 1966). As the revitalized nature of religion in today's world calls secularization theories into question (P. Berger 1999), secularism too is being interrogated. Not only is secularism a historical product of modernity, the eventual outcome of Protestant Christianity prioritizing personal choice in religious matters (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2008), but the assumption that secularism is *the* superior feminist position is being called into question as women exercise agency through religion, and because it marginalizes religious women, labeling them victims of religious oppression (Reilly 2011).

Feminism played a role in the process of secularization in Western Europe and North America, historians and social scientists argue. Secularization is "the process whereby religious thinking, practices and institutions lose social significance" (Wilson 1966, xiv). Religion remains, but only in the private sphere. Insofar as secularization occurred, gender

scholars argue that men and women encountered it differently because of their different public/private positioning (Aune, Sharma and Vincett 2008; Brown 2001, 2007; Woodhead 2005). During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, more women than men stayed religious because they were occupied by domestic work in the private sphere. But women's lives diversified in the late twentieth century, giving women freedom beyond the private (religious) sphere. Second-wave feminism raised women's aspirations beyond a female role to diverse options – motherhood, marriage, sexual relationships outside heterosexual marriage, employment, travel, education, etc. In the 1960s, Brown (2001, 192) argues, “British women secularized the construction of their identity, and the churches started to lose them.” Brown believes that feminist narratives of female freedom partly explain the steep decline in institutional Christianity (e.g., churchgoing, baptisms, and confirmations). For Brown (2001, 192), “the keys to understanding secularization in Britain are the simultaneous de-pietization of femininity and the de-feminization of piety.”

Oral history interviews endorse Brown's thesis that feminism supported British women's religious disaffiliation (Browne 2013). Quantitative evidence from the UK and U.S. illustrates that women whose lives diversify from wife- and motherhood are less likely to stay at church or report feeling close to God (Marler 2008; Woodhead 2005). Secularization is “almost entirely de-Christianization” (Brown 2007, 394) in this body of work, which connects the diversification of women's lives with church decline.

### **The feminist turn to spirituality**

While feminism encouraged de-Christianization, it precipitated alternative spirituality. Previously called “New Age,” Sointu and Woodhead (2008, 259) define holistic spiritualities as “those forms of practice involving the body, which have become increasingly visible since the 1980s, and that have as their goal the attainment of wholeness and well-being of ‘body,

mind, and spirit’.” Complementary medicine, shiatsu, and Wicca are examples. Proportions of European and North American populations actively committed to holistic spiritualities stand at around 2-5 percent, while a larger 10-20 percent see themselves as “spiritual not religious” (Sointu and Woodhead 2008). There is a large literature on the growth of alternative spiritualities in the U.S. (Roof 1999), Europe (Houtman and Aupers 2007), and the UK (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). These spiritualities are often described as creating a “spiritual marketplace” (Roof 1999) reflecting the consumerism of late modernity, or as individualistic and narcissistic (Bellah et al. 1985). Sointu and Woodhead consider the individualistic charge unfair, since their focus on the self is a corrective to traditional notions of femininity as self-sacrifice. They are popular with women because

...holistic spiritualities align with traditional spheres and representations of femininity, while simultaneously supporting and encouraging a move away from selfless to expressive selfhood. By endorsing and sanctioning “living life for others” and “living life for oneself,” holistic spiritualities offer a way of negotiating dilemmas of selfhood that face many women – and some men – in late modern contexts (Sointu and Woodhead 2008, 259).

Moreover, alternative spiritualities are relational, directed towards others as well as enriching women’s neglected selves.

Since the 1970s, feminism has been associated with alternative spiritualities; this is the form of religion/spirituality that feminist scholars have shown most interest in.

Practitioners argued that rather than getting rid of the concept of the divine, women needed a female divine figure to reaffirm women’s bodies, which were traditionally denigrated as impure or purely sexual. From Carol Christ’s 1978 conference address “Why women need

the Goddess,” feminist spirituality spread through a range of pagan, Wiccan, and goddess-focused spiritualities, as Eller’s (1993) American study demonstrates. In Heelas and Woodhead’s (2005) study of Kendal, a northern English town where 2-3 percent of the population were involved in alternative spiritual activities (against a weekly churchgoing rate of 7.9 percent), 80 per cent of participants in New Age spirituality were women. Brown suggests (2007, 414), perhaps prematurely, that today “the New Age...is the site for the new femininity of British religion.” These British examples fit within a large North American feminist literature that sees holistic spirituality as a way in which feminist and religio-spiritual identities can be aligned (e.g., H. Berger 1999; Eller 1993; Salomonsen 2002).

### **Religious feminisms**

Less visible in feminist literature is the third theme, religiously-based feminisms. These have begun to be investigated in the twenty-first century and include Ingersoll’s (2003) research with the American evangelical Christian feminist movement, McGinty’s (2007) with Swedish feminist converts to Islam, Zwissler’s (2007) with Canadian feminist social justice activists, and Klassen’s (2009) essay collection on third-wave feminists and spirituality. The few European studies include Daggers’ (2002) on the 1970s and 1980s British Christian feminist movement. Fedele’s (2013) anthropological journeys with pilgrims visiting French Catholic shrines to Mary Magdalene reveal the complex ways women fuse Catholic spirituality with feminist notions of the “sacred feminine” and neo-pagan and indigenous traditions. Vincett’s (2008) UK study of Christian and goddess feminists reveals a similar fusion of neo-pagan and Christian feminist spiritualities. These new studies show feminists using religious resources to negotiate and challenge gender inequalities within their religious traditions, personal lives, and societies.



The literature, then, posits three trajectories in feminists' engagement with religion: feminist secularism and secularization, the feminist turn to spirituality, and religio-spiritual feminist groups. My study builds on, yet challenges, this literature. It also study builds on an article in which I analyzed survey data (n = 1,265) on UK feminists' religious and spiritual views (Aune 2011). Survey participants were asked, "Describe your religious and spiritual views (including none/atheist/agnostic)." Comparison with surveys of religious adherence revealed that these feminists are significantly less traditionally religious and somewhat more "spiritual" than the UK female population. Over half of the sample were atheist (39 percent) or had no religion (15 percent). Agnostics made up 15 percent. Eleven percent supported a major world religion. Eight percent were spiritual (in a general sense or identifying with alternative spiritualities). The final 12 percent displayed three tendencies: merging or blurring positions ("spiritual atheist" or "Jewish agnostic"), difficulties in defining their religious views, or describing previous religious positions ("lapsed Catholic"). Asking why it might be that they were much less religious yet slightly more spiritual, I posited three explanations: feminism's alignment with secularism, secularization and feminism's role within it, and feminism's association with alternative spiritualities. This article develops that work through an analysis of interview data. While this study does not claim to produce generalizable findings, the data are rich and indicative of trends and patterns that should be explored further.

In this interview study of UK feminists, I argue that feminists' religio-spiritual approaches should not simply be equated with secularism, secularization, or alternative spiritualities. Instead, feminists forge religio-spiritual lives in complex ways. The spiritual approaches of those I interviewed had three main characteristics: they are *de-churched*, are *relational*, and emphasize *practice*. Moreover, contrary to some scholarly approaches that see "spirituality" and "religion" as analytically distinct, I argue that feminist spirituality should be conceptualized as "lived religion."

## METHODS

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a quota sample of thirty participants drawn from the survey of feminists. The survey targeted those involved in new forms of feminism that had emerged in the UK since 2000; this emphasis on new groups accounts for the high proportion (three quarters) in their 20s and 30s. Interview participants were selected to ensure a geographical spread across England, Scotland, and Wales.<sup>1</sup> Sampling reflected the survey patterns in relation to age, sexuality (40 percent of survey participants identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, or otherwise non-heterosexual), gender (91 percent identified as female, 7 percent as male, and the rest as “other” or withheld a response), ethnicity (91 percent were white), and religio-spiritual views. Interviewees were between 18 and 80 years of age when surveyed (2008-2009); interviews took place nearly two years later (2010). Twenty-seven identified as female, two as male, and one as “other.” Fourteen were heterosexual, nine bisexual, three lesbian or gay, and three “other” (“pansexual,” “politically celibate,” and “unsure”); one participant selected “prefer not to say.” Interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and thematically coded.

Participants were asked about: a) religious background and upbringing (including family and schooling); b) spiritual and religious attitudes and beliefs (whether they held religious or spiritual beliefs, how these had developed, and what might have influenced any changes); and c) spiritual and religious practices (attendance at places of worship, individual practices such as meditation, prayer, or clothing, or engagement with spiritual literature, art, or music).

My survey research categorized feminists’ approaches to religion on two levels: in broad categories (“atheist,” “no religion,” “agnostic,” “major world religion,” “spiritual,” and “other”), and detailed categories of specific world religions and manifestations of spirituality

(e.g., “spiritual but not religious” or “alternative spirituality”). Such simplifications, while useful in quantitative work, ignore commonalities in feminists’ responses across these constructed categories, complexities that become visible through qualitative research, as this article will show. Data analysis took place in two stages: first, to get an overview of participants’ responses to the main interview topics (religious background and upbringing, spiritual and religious attitudes and beliefs, and spiritual and religious practices), key themes were identified (for example, each participant’s upbringing was categorized as “Muslim”, “Christian”, “non-religious” or “background Christianity” and placed alongside written summaries of the participants’ narratives about their upbringing). Second, transcripts were examined and coded to identify broader themes and characteristics of feminists’ spiritual approaches that recurred across the interviews. Three emerged: feminist spiritualities are *de-churched*, are *relational*, and emphasize *practice*.

## FINDINGS

### **Feminist spiritualities are de-churched**

The first characteristic of feminist spirituality is that it is *de-churched*. This term rarely appears in the sociology of religion (for an exception, see Wood 2010), but it is more accurate than *de-institutionalized* (which obscures the fact that it is the Christian church and not another religious institution that these feminists have become distanced from) or *de-Christianized* (which falsely conflates distance from the church with no longer being Christian). Almost all participants were no longer involved with the institutional church. During childhood and youth, two thirds of participants were engaged, to varying degrees, with the church. For some, especially the five with Christian parents, the church was in the foreground. Gabriella’s<sup>2</sup> (age 28) family were Italian Catholics:

Gabriella: I've never been religious as such although I followed the Catholic faith up to when I was 12, I mean, there are different steps in the Catholic religion.

Interviewer: Like the Holy Communion.

Gabriella: Yes, Holy Communion, all that. So until the age of reason basically, I was sent to Sunday school and all the rest of it and then when I was about 12 I decided to stop. I was part of the Scouts, which here is called Girl Guides,<sup>3</sup> so I had to go to church and then I had, like, the break-off when I was 17 and decided, "OK, that's not for me," because I never believed.

Similarly, Jennifer's (age 59) father was a Presbyterian church elder. She grew up reading the Bible regularly and attending church. Theology was one of her majors at university, she explained, laughing, "at which point of course I totally stopped believing in God."

For half of the participants – who had attended Church of England or Roman Catholic schools, or had a churchgoing friend or family member – church formed more of a childhood backdrop. Karen's (age 25) mother worked at a Catholic secondary school:

I went there because mum worked there, and our family wasn't religious but a lot of the people at the school were... We went to Mass every week and a lot of the people took Holy Communion, and we had a lot of religious education... I know quite a lot about Christian religion and I studied aspects of Judaism as well, but apart from that I don't really... the things that I learnt about Christian religion I never believed and I never really took it at face value.

For Karen, Christianity was something she learnt about at school and participated in there when required, but it never became a personal faith or a feature of her adult life.

By adulthood, all participants were dissociated from the institutional church, and none attended regularly. Christianity remained in the self-descriptions of only three (Harriet, a liberal Christian, Beth, a Roman Catholic, and Melanie, a Buddhist Anglican). As will be discussed, spiritual practices remained important to many of them, but did not require close ties with the church.

Some, like Karen and Gabriella, ceased contact with the church because they did not “believe.” Some associated church with school life, and, on leaving school, they did not seek out a church. This reflects what happens to most British people as they reach adulthood. The Anglican and Roman Catholic churches run a third of UK schools, but weekly church attendance currently stands at only 6 percent. By adulthood, most British people take what Davie (2007) terms a “vicarious” approach to religion: It is as if a small number of people (religious professionals, Sunday school teachers, religious broadcasters) perform religion on behalf of a much larger population, who participate vicariously. The movement of these feminists towards perceiving Christianity vicariously or as a cultural backdrop reflects its status for most British people.

Not all perceived their childhood Christianity negatively. Deborah’s (age 29) Church of England school had inculcated morality and “Golden Rule Christianity.” While she later disconnected from church, she had found these experiences positive:

I went to a C of E primary school so we had a lot of...religious-y things going on there although there were some students who were not Christian, probably Hindu I think, or Sikh. There was a vicar who was tied quite closely to the school and came in a lot to do assemblies and things. I went to Brownies and

Guides and I suppose they were fairly religious, it's more just like church attendance and knowing about stories from the Bible... I think the primary schools are quite good. It made us see the more good things about Christianity and the sort of the moral of the story is like, be nice to people, take care of everyone, and be respectful... I never got any of the sort of god-fearing, strike-you-down-with-lightning and things like what not to do.

Others dissociated because of a negative experience with the church. Raised by humanist "ex-Christian" parents, Tamara, 39, turned to the church at age 10 or 11 to explore her spiritual feelings. Her parents opposed her churchgoing, but she persevered until she felt that her feminist and pagan views were incompatible with Christianity:

My parents gave me such a hard time... I carried on, but in the meantime I was reading books about witchcraft and paganism... Eventually I stopped going to church... Having read these books I thought, "Oh, I'm clearly not a Christian," and having been to church I realised I wasn't a Christian because I wasn't that excited by that whole thing of the patriarchal father, son, and holy ghost thing and the whole guilt stuff and about Jesus rising from the dead and our sin and... it just wasn't really a life-giving religion... It didn't feel like a religion that had any place for my feminist view of the world... It felt like a religion that had *no* sympathy for women ...By the time I was 16 I was calling myself a pagan. Now I don't think I have a religion because I don't follow any religious practices...but I do have very strong spiritual feelings.

Harriet, 24, one of the few who became more engaged with organized religion during adolescence, was taken to church by her parents who believed it would win her a place at a respected church-run school. She developed a Christian spirituality, helped by her friends, but was critical of the institutional church:

My parents aren't religious at all, really. I had to go to church until I was 11 but that was mainly to get me into secondary school. Then a couple of my friends made me see that Christianity wasn't necessarily as constraining as it had been put about that it was so I sort of found it my own way... I went to church for a little bit without my parents but I realized I didn't really like what the church was saying either and I thought it should be about your personal relationship with God and the things that you do rather than some sort of regimented "stand up now, sit down now, say a prayer now." I think it should get into everyday life by being nice to people and always just trying to be the best person that you can be.

Of the two women who identified as Muslim, one had distanced herself from some Islamic practices. However, religious observance for Muslims – especially for women, who are not expected to attend mosque if they have family responsibilities – is less focused around the mosque and more around practicing the five pillars (declaration of faith, five daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, pilgrimage to Mecca, and charity) (Hussain 2008). Ceasing mosque attendance does not take on the same significance as ceasing attending church. Aisha, 45, said that, now in her second marriage to a non-practicing Catholic, she prays and fasts less than she did when married to her first husband, who was Muslim. Laila, 65, was brought up

in the Swedenborg New Church but converted to Islam upon marriage. One of the things that attracted her to Islam was its lack of traditions and formalities:

What attracted me to Islam was it didn't have all the trappings of the Christian religion that I was brought up in, that we don't have idols and we don't have statues and we don't have all those sorts of things, there's no intermediaries.

Those raised without a religion remained distant from religion as adults. A few became more or less strongly atheist: Ruth, 31, became more "actively atheist." Paul, 20, was "against religion" but less of a "militant atheist" than he had been a few years before. Margaret, 82, Jackie, 44, and Nerys, 29, embraced humanism. Margaret joined a humanist organization in her 70s, and gave her husband and mother humanist funerals. All three saw humanism as an ethical stance asserting the importance of being good to others; as Nerys put it, "I became more positive about humanism rather than negative about the rest of the moralists." With all participants disconnected from the institutional church by adulthood, de-churching is a hallmark of feminists' spiritual approaches.

### **Feminist spiritualities are relational**

Feminists' spiritual approaches are, secondly, *relational*. As the excerpts above indicate, feminists describe their movement away from the church as a decision shaped by and embedded in relationship networks. During childhood, many experienced socialization into Christianity by parents, schools, and churches. Others experienced socialization into non-religion, and this sense of spiritual deficit led a few to explore spirituality, either by attending church or reading about paganism. Circumstances relating to their relationships also contributed to feminists changing their views about spirituality – for instance, parents' deaths



or intimate relationships with partners who were more or less religious. When discussing their movement towards or out of religion, participants mentioned the influence of parents, grandparents, siblings, friends, and partners.

The impact of relational networks on feminists' spiritual formation reflects a body of work demonstrating that families are central to the transmission of faith; people's spiritual approaches are often similar to those of their families (Arweck and Nesbitt 2010; Voas and Crockett 2005). Voas and Crockett (2005) also reveal an erosion of churchgoing religiosity between generations in Britain: In their study, even with two churchgoing parents, only 50 percent of young adults remained church attendees. A landmark longitudinal study of 200 Americans' religious lives, consisting of interviews at five points from the 1930s to the 1990s, found "the specific sociobiographical, cultural, and historical contexts in which lives unfold" (Dillon and Wink 2007, 11-12) to be key to understanding "the nature, place, and meaning of religion."

Stephanie, 24, presents a poignant example of the interaction of family, friends, and religious attitudes. Stephanie was not brought up in a religion. At age 12, she started to go to a large evangelical church with other local children. The church had a lively children's program, which she enjoyed. However, her stepfather ridiculed her, so a year later she stopped going. At the time of interview, she described herself as "not really religious." But her mother's death when she was in her late teens had an impact on her views of religion/spirituality. "It was comforting to believe in angels," she said. "It was nice to think that maybe she was one or that she was looking down on me." But the experience alienated her from conventional religious belief, as she wondered why God would allow her mother's early death.

Many of those who were not brought up religious were the children of parents who disengaged from church before having children. Marie, 24, explained:

I didn't really have a religious upbringing. My parents chose not to baptise me. They come from...obviously my dad, because he's English he's Protestant, he doesn't practice at all. My mum would be Catholic, I guess, but she didn't practice either. So they just – I thought it was pretty nice of them actually – they chose not to baptise me. They told me, “We want you to choose whichever religion, you know, when you grow up. If you're religious you can get baptised and join the church or be a Muslim, or whatever you want to be.”

While Marie's parents were deinstitutionalized, Marie herself was simply brought up without a religion. Like Marie's parents, Nerys and Melanie's presented religion as a choice they could make in later life. But given the extent to which choosing a spiritual practice is embedded in relational contexts, the absence of religion in their key relational networks makes it unlikely that they will adopt a spiritual practice.

Deborah's childhood Anglicanism was challenged at university by friends:

I was at my first year in uni and I used to wear a crucifix on a chain, just because it was a bit of jewelry, and a friend of mine went off on this big rant about organised religion and how it was really bad. I'd never really come across views like that before so it was just, like, “Well, it's just a cross on a chain, I just wear it because it's pretty,” and he was a bit like, “Hmm, not sure about that,” and I suppose that was the first time I started thinking, “Hmm, okay...,” started being a bit more open to other ways of thinking.

While she had not stopped thinking or reading about religion, her skeptical attitude made her feel at odds with her family who were “still a little bit religious.”

A similar experience was recalled by Iona, 41, whose Catholic parents had brought her up attending Mass weekly and sent her sister to a convent school. Her sister is still a practicing Catholic, but Iona and her brother are atheists. To avoid conflict, Iona and her family avoid talking about religion:

I tend not to discuss religion with my family, my parents luckily completely respect my views, we don't really go there, other than when something the Pope says really upsets me and I just have to let it out...I wouldn't take Communion now, so I didn't take Communion at my grandmother's funeral a couple of years ago, which was a bit sticky, but you know, I couldn't do that.

Occasionally, as Iona experienced when she refused Communion at her grandmother's funeral, it is necessary to risk family disapproval in order to stay true to one's conscience.

Along with friends and family, sexual partners were important conversation partners. For some, religious differences raised conflict: Emily's (21) female partner was a Christian, which atheist Emily found difficult, and lesbian Frances, 46, was distressed when her sister became an evangelical Christian. Others shared their partners' views. Melanie, 54, was encouraged to explore Buddhism by her female partner, and prompted to return to the church she had left by Jewish friends.

Some of the queer feminists came up against negative attitudes from the church as they developed their sexual identities and relationships. Naomi, 21, who identified as “pansexual,” explained: “A lot of the religions just, well, for a start, they would probably discriminate against me a little bit...So I can't identify with something which doesn't seem to

like me very much.” Given that half of the feminist participants identified as lesbian, bisexual, queer, or otherwise non-heterosexual (reflecting the survey findings), LGBT sexuality emerges in this study as a significant relational context for the formation of spiritual attitudes. These findings challenge recent work presenting LGBT or queer spiritualities as individualistic rather than relational (Wilcox 2009; Yip 2005).

### **Feminist spiritualities emphasize practice**

Feminists’ religio-spiritual approaches are, thirdly, oriented towards *practice*. The Muslim and Christian participants followed a range of religious practices. The daughter of Pakistani parents (a Muslim mother and a Communist father), Aisha describes herself as having a strong faith in God but engages in Islamic practices less since remarrying. She describes her adult children as more religiously observant than she (for instance, she no longer always fasts during Ramadan). However, her daily life accords with Islamic behavioral codes: She neither drinks alcohol nor eats non-halal food, and dresses “conservatively,” wearing a locket inscribed with an Arabic prayer most days. She celebrates Ramadan with her extended family, friends, and neighbors. Asked if she attends mosque, she replied:

I wouldn’t go on a regular basis. If I was going there for a particular event and I was going with my mum, I would go. And I don’t get my prayer mat out and do my five prayers, but what I do, I don’t know if it’s habit, but there are certain prayers that you say quietly, which I do all the time. I say my prayers every night before I go to sleep. That’s just something I’ve always done, I’ve never not done it and I say, because it’s part of the language, things like,

“Shukar Alhamdulillah, thanks be to God,” and they’re just part of my vocabulary.

The extent to which religion remains a habit or, as Bourdieu (1977) puts it, part of someone’s “habitus” (deep-rooted dispositions governing actions) is a question Aisha’s response raises; as Mahmood (2005) argues, the role of the habitus should be examined when investigating women’s religiosity.

Raised Roman Catholic, Beth, 25, maintained a strong faith throughout childhood, aspiring to be a nun. She developed socialist political views as a teenager and rejected the church’s stance on abortion. Attending a Christian group at university, she became critical of the way the Bible was used against women. These attitudes distanced her from the church, yet she still identifies as Roman Catholic, attends confession occasionally, and does the rosary. Christian art (especially pietas) and music move her, and she sings hymns while doing domestic chores. She likes a poem she has on her wall, Kaylin Haught’s “God Says Yes to Me,” which speaks about God as female. Like other participants, she values ritual:

I like the rituals of it, and I like the aesthetics, which is part of why I like Ash Wednesday and Palm Sunday, ’cause you’ve got the symbols and the crosses and I like sort of thinking about the way that we develop these traditions and how old they are and how they must have come...it all developed slowly and I really like sort of feeling part of that history.

Buddhist Anglican Melanie fuses an agnostic approach with Buddhism and Anglican Christianity. “Fusers,” a term coined in Vincett’s (2008, 133) study of Christian and neo-pagan feminists, “represent a new form of ‘spiritualized Christianity’.” Fusers comprise a

spectrum, incorporating elements of the holistic “subjective turn” (Heelas and Woodhead 2005) into their Christianity, or, for those more committed to paganism, retaining only small elements from their Christian past. In Vincett’s (2008, 137) study, the trend towards fusing was “unidirectional”; all fusers were previously Christian or raised as such, but none moved from paganism towards Christianity. Like Vincett’s participants, Melanie’s childhood connection to Christianity had been strong: She chose to be christened at the age of ten and attended different denominational services during her teens with her father. Beginning university and coming out as a lesbian, she abandoned Christianity as patriarchal. Later she became interested in Judaism and Buddhism, and, as described previously, was encouraged by Jewish acquaintances to return to church. Having attended a Buddhist retreat two years before the interview with her female partner (whose father is Buddhist), she took up Zen Buddhist meditation and attended church regularly. She got on well with the vicar and joined the Bible reading rota, but was disappointed by the lack of religious practice she observed. Quakers, she felt, were better at integrating faith into their lives:

My vicar’s very clear that it doesn’t matter a jot whether you go to church or not, what matters is what you do, but ... as an Anglican I don’t think it’s really in our consciousness, the real everydayness about it. But it’s, for me, about every day, the details of how we treat every moment of every day and how we treat each other, it’s just really, really important, so I like that word “practice” because that’s all you do, you’re practicing – practice practice practice [laughs]. I’m not a Buddhist or a Christian, I’m practicing!

For her, ritual is important. Recalling Aisha’s question about the extent to which Islamic prayer is a “habit,” “just part of my vocabulary,” Melanie described how repeating the words

of confession of sin during the Anglican service recalls for her how Christianity has negatively shaped UK society. While this might appear an off-putting experience, it is as if the words of confession provide a perverse comfort, recalling the familiar structures of her childhood and society:

There's something about the ritual of communion that I like... the congregational saying confession at the same time just makes me laugh inside. I just think, well, that's a good reminder of why we're such dowdy whatsits... Most of my childhood I wasn't at church, but going back and then hearing the words again I just think, yeah, that just sums up the oppression in the society. So I find that very useful.

The three pagan or alternative spirituality practitioners also emphasized ritual and daily practice. These practices included making a sacred space at home (an altar for Anya, 23, a garden for Sandy, 36), wearing special jewelry (Anya's owl necklace represented the goddess Athena, and Sandy wears a goddess ring), and celebrating pagan festivals; Sandy also had a pagan wedding. Sonia, 37, who rejected Christianity for Wicca and paganism in her teens, saw paganism as an "earth-based spirituality with magic and witchcraft involved." Paganism sees everything and everyone as "made of the same stuff," she explained, and all actions have effects. She practices spellwork, likening it to prayer:

I don't like to say that spellwork and magic is like prayer but there are similarities; whereas a Christian or Muslim would pray to their God, my spell is more of a kind of interactive version of that... I talk to what I presume to be sort of a deity in my head, not as a sort of kneel down, put my hands together,

but if I want something to happen I might do a ritual that essentially is asking for that to happen. I send emotion, my energy to get it to happen, but I also would then add into it normal things... The classic one is hunting for a job or finding a partner, you do all the rituals in the world but if you sit in your living room or your garden and don't actually do anything about it, it's not going to turn up on your doorstep.

Participants' focus on action, not just belief, is important, and is a feature of work on lived religion, as I will discuss. Practice is both a noun and a verb; as Bender (2012) points out, religion is not simply a series of practices, but something that people are constantly doing. This is not to say that all spiritual practices are understood as such by those doing them. Karen, an agnostic, practiced yoga for exercise, not spiritual reasons.

Moreover, practices some scholars class as "spiritual" were also found among atheists and humanists, who saw atheism or humanism as a positive engagement with the world, as Ruth put it, as the practice of doing good to others. Jackie explained:

It's the acts that people do, the help that you get from people. I don't think there's a higher being, a greater force. I think we're here and we're on our own, and it's down to us to get on with it... I try to be tolerant ... I try to act in the way that I would like people to treat me. Sometimes if I see a stranger on the bus – I just see a girl and she's wearing a really nice dress – I will say to her, "I really like your dress, it really suits you," because I know that if somebody pays me a compliment it makes me feel good... So those are the ways I try and be a humanist. I give to charities.



Lynne, 24, said she had no religion, but her values shape her actions. Raised by atheist parents but with a Christian grandmother, she believes in energy and balance but would not refer to them as “God.” Balance is important to her, and she believes that good actions will reap rewards, using the illustration of “driving karma”:

One of my main ideas is about balance and how if you do something good, that makes you a good person and good things will happen to you and if you look out for someone else they’ll look after you... if you’ve got good driving karma you’ll get a space at the car park, if you’ve got bad driving karma you don’t get a space. So I often think... how can I go about something the right way? I don’t know if I’d call that meditating or not, because I still haven’t decided if this is a religion or if this is what most people do. But I try and take time out every day and think, “Am I doing it right?,” “Am I a good person?,” “Have my actions today made the world a better place?,” or, y’know, “Do I need to do some recycling?!”

Lynne is not conventionally religious, but is open to the idea that practicing doing good might constitute a religio-spiritual act.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

How do these findings inform existing debates? First, the feminism vs. religion approach common in earlier feminist scholarship was evident for some participants, but a minor theme. Although they rarely used the term “secularism,” most of them felt that institutional religion was implicated in, and even caused, women’s subordination.

In relation to secularization, feminism appears to have led some participants away from the church, and many felt that religious institutions fail to respect women's experiences. Other factors – relationships with family, friends and partners, sexuality, and education – also influenced my interviewees. Feminism is associated with disaffiliation from church but only slightly with rejection of Christian practices or beliefs. This is important, suggesting to scholars of secularization that disaffiliation from church should not be assumed to constitute religious decline; church attendance is just one measure of religiosity.

The second feminist trajectory, emphasizing holistic feminist spirituality, was evident; I also observed a movement towards alternative religio-spiritual manifestations that were embodied and practiced in daily life. But distinctions between institutional Christianity (“religion”) and alternative spiritualities (“spirituality”) – epitomized in Heelas and Woodhead's (2005) contrast between “life-as” religion and “subjective-life” spiritualities – fail to reflect feminists' experiences. Third, in showing how feminist activists utilize spiritual resources, this study mirrors the new studies of religiously-based feminisms. Moreover, I observed three characteristics present in feminists' spiritual approaches: They are de-churched, are relational, and emphasize practice. These characteristics make it appropriate, I propose, to conceptualize feminist spirituality as lived religion.

Coined by Hall (1997), the term “lived religion” involves a focus on people's everyday religious experiences. Hall preferred “lived religion” to “popular religion” (which had developed to signify the difference between official forms of religion propagated by religious leaders and institutions, and how religion was lived out in daily life) because it lacks the “the distinction between high and low that seems inevitably to recur in studies of popular religion” (Hall 1997, ix). The term, explains McGuire (2008, 12), “is useful for distinguishing the actual experience of religious persons from the prescribed religion of institutionally defined beliefs and practices.” Everyday bodily experiences – like gardening, walking, or

domestic work – are often the means by which people experience the sacred. Emotion is integral. Lived religion incorporates how the material body experiences the spiritual with everyday material culture – clothing, household consumption, or religious objects – and with locality – place, geography, the global, and the local (Neitz 2011).

Lived religion scholars emphasize the *practice* of religion, but the spiritual practices of which they write are far broader than sociologists have conventionally examined, and take place across multiple contexts. Ammerman (2007, 12), using the related term “everyday religion,” explains that in the contemporary “dynamic religious culture” “official and unofficial religious ideas and practices are shaped into everyday strategies of action” that “take place not only across cultural and religious traditions but also across the multiple settings in which modern people create life.”

In emphasizing *practice*, lived religion differs from substantive understandings of religion as belief, dispensing with the view that one is not religious unless one adheres to officially-recognized doctrines. It offers scholars “a fundamental rethinking of what religion is and of what it means to be ‘religious’” (Orsi 1997, 7). Importantly, the lived religion concept gets over the spirituality versus religion dichotomy. Religious and spiritual phenomena overlap; they are interconnected and complex, not distinct and distinguishable.

This study of UK feminists illustrates these points. For them, religion and spirituality are complex phenomena. Some of them saw institutionalized spiritualities, especially Christianity, as restrictive or oppressive. Some considered holistic or pagan spirituality a better alternative. But they did not tell a simple story of movement from institutional religion to individualized, or holistic, spirituality. They experienced spirituality and religion in more complex ways than the religion vs. spirituality distinction allows for: Religion and spirituality were embedded in their childhoods and relational networks, even while, for the atheists especially, they functioned as something to define themselves against or sources of family

conflict. Practice was important to their spirituality. Religion and spirituality were *lived*. The study's key finding is that feminist spirituality *is* lived religion.

In arguing this, my study supports not only the work of lived religion scholars, but also Fedele and Knibbe's (2012) new ethnographic work on gender and spirituality. They also reject the spirituality/religion distinction, since there is no clear difference between people who describe themselves as spiritual and those calling themselves religious, and many people see themselves as both; Roussou's (2012, 57) ethnography in Fedele and Knibbe's volume of Greek women who "perceive religion and spirituality as complementary and amalgamate the two" illustrates this. Writing favorably of the lived religion approach, Fedele and Knibbe (2012, 3) also critique "the claims of contemporary 'spirituality' to offer (gendered) empowerment and to be free from the 'traditional' gendered hierarchies (in contrast to 'religion')." "Institutional religions can empower women, just as alternative spiritualities can end up reproducing gender stereotypes or gendered domination" (2012, 5).

Building on recent empirical studies of religious feminism, I argue for a new conceptualization of feminist religio-spiritual approaches as lived religion. While feminist scholars' journey from critiquing religion to exploring feminist spirituality has contributed important insights about how individuals blend feminist and feminist identities, neither approach takes into account the full feminist experience. The full feminist experience includes, as this study shows, a blend of elements often categorized as *either* "spiritual" *or* "religious"; it includes recourse to religious traditions (Islamic, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist), such as the singing of Christian hymns or recitation of Islamic prayers, alongside detachment from religious institutions (in this British example, the Christian church). The feminist experience prioritizes relationships as the context for religio-spiritual formation, while foregrounding, as alternative spiritualities do, the need to nourish the self. The full feminist

experience emphasizes religio-spiritual practices, not doctrines, but this does not mean beliefs play no part.

The feminist religio-spiritual experience also offers sociologists of religion an empirical basis for the critique of the conceptual distinction between religion and spirituality. As Wood (2010, 281) argues:

Ethnographic evidence shows that people's discourses, practices and interactions in contexts considered (by themselves or sociologists) as "spirituality" in fact relate explicitly to contexts labeled as "religion".... whilst "religion" and "spirituality" may sometimes and in some contexts relate to distinct discourses and practices, the clear linkage between these necessitates a *single* analytical category.

Wood contends that the posited religion/spirituality distinction is not sufficiently sociological, because it ignores the social context of people's lives:

Through its conceptual distinction between "religion" and "spirituality," this sociology lifts people out of their social contexts, with the result that it fails adequately to address social practice, social interaction, and the wider contexts of people's lives and biographies (2010, 267).

There is a need for more thoroughly sociological explorations of religio-spirituality or, to use my preferred term, "lived religion." As this study shows, feminists' religio-spiritual approaches are socially located and tied to social practice, social interaction, and the wider context of their biographies and lives; "spirituality" or 'religion' can be understood only

within the social and cultural configurations and historical trajectories in which such self-identifications occur” (Fedele and Knibbe 2012, 6).

This study contributes to the growing field of research on gender, feminism, and religion. To scholars of gender, it demonstrates the importance of taking seriously the role spirituality and religion play in feminists’ lives. To scholars of religion it challenges the conceptual dichotomy between religion and spirituality and provides an empirical basis for doing so. That these feminists forge religio-spiritual lives in ways that are de-churched, relational, and oriented towards practice provides further endorsement for the concept of lived religion. Moreover, this study has ramifications beyond the field of feminism and religion. If feminists, as the evidence suggests, represent the vanguard of new forms of femininity that later spread to the wider culture (Brown 2007, 414), this study is of wider significance: The forms of spirituality and religion expressed, rejected, and wrestled with by these UK feminists may become increasingly present, in European and other post-industrial societies. To understand the future of religion we must not only, as Marler (2008) argues, “watch the women”; we must also watch the feminists.

## **NOTES**

1. Because few respondents resided in Northern Ireland, and to reduce travel costs, no interviews were conducted there.
2. Participants’ names are pseudonyms.
3. Girls clubs with loosely Christian roots; these are part of the international scouts and guides movement, first established in the early twentieth century.

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*Kristin Aune is Reader in Sociology at the University of Derby, UK, where she researches feminism, gender and religion. Her books include Reclaiming the F Word (Zed, 2013) and Christianity and the University Experience (Bloomsbury, 2013). She has published in Men & Masculinities, European Journal of Women’s Studies, Feminist Review and Journal of Contemporary Religion.*