

# **Much less religious, a little more spiritual: The religious and spiritual views of third-wave feminists in the UK**

## **ABSTRACT**

How religious or spiritual are feminists today? Filling a gap in the literature on feminism and religion, this article outlines findings from the first survey-based study of feminists' spiritual attitudes in recent years. Drawing on survey data, this article explores the religious and spiritual views of 1,265 third-wave feminists, most of whom are female and in their twenties and thirties. Comparison with surveys of religious adherence in the UK reveals that these feminists are significantly less religious and somewhat more spiritual than the general population. The article goes on to ask why this might be, and suggests three explanations: feminism's alignment with secularism, secularization and feminism's role within it, and feminism's association with alternative spiritualities.

**KEYWORDS:** feminism, women, spirituality, religion, secularization, secularism

How religious or spiritual are feminists today? In the twenty-first century, feminist engagement with religion is undergoing considerable transformation. In the last few decades, since the rebirth of the women's movement in the 1960s and 70s, many academic feminists have paid little attention to religion. It was not until the 1980s that feminist literature on religion, often produced by feminists with spiritual and religious

commitments, appeared in significant quantity. Then and into the 1990s and beyond, scholars began addressing the thorny question ‘why, given that religions often define and restrict women’s roles, are women religious?’ Greatest interest was displayed in women within seemingly conservative religious communities: Davidman’s (1991) study of women converting to Orthodox Judaism, Klatch’s (1987) work on women and the new Christian right and Boddy’s (1989) study of women in a Sudanese zār healing cult are typical. Most such studies were detailed and ethnographic rather than quantitative. Appreciating that religions are not uniformly oppressive to women, researchers’ question then became something like ‘Does religion X empower or oppress women, and in what ways?’

But as Woodhead (2002) has pointed out, asking ‘does religion empower or oppress women?’ is problematic. First, it is too broad to do justice to religious complexity in the modern world; there will be, for instance, contexts where commitment to Hinduism helps women assert their rights and identities, and contexts where Hindu ideals of womanhood constrain and subordinate women to their husbands. Second, the meaning of ‘good’ or ‘bad’, ‘liberating’ or ‘oppressive’ varies from culture to culture. Western nations tend to place a premium on liberation as autonomy, but in more community-based societies, or contexts where women lack an independent income to ‘purchase’ freedom, autonomy may be neither desired nor desirable. Freedom can surely be found through interdependence, a value religions often emphasise. Third, the ‘is religion good or bad for women?’ question is problematic because as many Western feminists have rejected religion, they have become deaf to the experiences of millions of women worldwide who *are* religious.

The colonialist assumptions implicit in this question are also troubling; as Fernandes (2003) and others argue. They reveal a legacy of western Enlightenment

thought, wherein autonomy and rationality are privileged over interdependence and spirituality, and where, under secularization and secularism, religion is relegated to the so-called private sphere and to ‘Other’, non-white, non-western women. Recently, such assumptions have been revealed and critiqued. Bracke (2008), for instance, critiques not just the secular feminist neglect of religion, but also the way religion is seen as opposed to modernity, so that religious women are viewed as returning to tradition or converting to conservative religion *despite* living in modern societies. Through an ethnographic study of pious Evangelical Christian and Islamic women in the Netherlands, Bracke repositions religious women as agents whose faith is part and parcel of modernity (rather than – as often imagined – a neo-traditional reaction against it).

But studies of feminists’ (rather than women’s in general) religious or spiritual attitudes are surprisingly sparse. There are a few studies of religious women’s approaches to feminism but no comparable work on feminist women’s (or men’s) approaches to religion/spirituality. Most work on feminists’ approaches to spirituality is qualitative and small-scale, addressing specific manifestations of religion or spirituality (e.g. Cochran’s 2005 study of evangelical Christian feminism in the US, Salomonsen’s 2002 work on the Reclaiming Witches in San Francisco or McGinty’s 2007 study of Swedish feminist converts to Islam), rather than asking feminists more generally about their spiritual or religious views. Zwissler’s (2007, 2009) work on the importance of spirituality for feminist social justice activists in Canada, also qualitative, is an exception. Additionally, Meldazy (2009) makes the point that feminists’ atheistic beliefs should be included in the study of women and spirituality; she gives the example of young women engaging with popular musicians who explore spiritual themes. But there appears to be no survey research on feminists’ attitudes to religion.

The findings reported in this article come from a wider study of British third-wave feminists – specifically, of people involved in manifestations of feminism (local groups, national organizations, conferences, festivals, single-issue campaigns and web-based forums) established in the UK since the beginning of the new millennium, and their characteristics, attitudes and activism (Redfern and Aune 2010). As I explain below, most of these feminists are in their twenties and thirties and identify as female. Before turning to the methodology and specifics of this study, two definitional issues need addressing: religion/ spirituality and third-wave feminism.

## **DEFINITIONS: ‘SPIRITUALITY’ OR ‘RELIGION’, AND THIRD-WAVE FEMINISM**

As a feminist religion researcher, I believe the category ‘religion’ should include a broad range – institutional and non-institutional, codified and self-fashioned – of manifestations of belief, practice, embodiment and/or belonging oriented towards the transcendent or supernatural; as Wilcox (2009: 10) writes, ‘religion encompasses beliefs and/or practices centered around ultimate meaning’. In other words, ‘religion’ includes ‘spirituality’; it should encompass twenty-first internet-based versions of Wicca as well as major world religions like Judaism and Buddhism. Yet, as Wilcox points out, this is not how many people see religion. For one thing, it has been privileged white male scholars who have defined, described and judged religion, and religious studies’ colonial legacy remains. In the study of religion, certain religions (especially Christianity) have been treated as if they were superior, with belief and rationality emphasised at the expense of practice and embodiment (Donaldson and Kwok Pui-lan

2002; McGuire 2008). Today, for many people in post-industrial countries like the US and Europe, 'religion' connotes a long-established, perhaps fixed and inflexible, major world religion, while 'spirituality' is more accommodating, signifying the search for transcendence outside traditional religious institutions (Flanagan and Jupp 2007). Indeed, this felt dichotomy between religion and spirituality is increasingly made into an analytical concept by sociologists of religion: in their influential book, Heelas and Woodhead (2005) map the rise of what they call 'subjective-life spirituality', which they believe is overtaking 'life-as religion' in popularity in the West ('life-as religion' is their term for traditional religions that require people to subordinate themselves to a divine authority). Yet while we should not take the perceived difference between religion and spirituality at face value, it is important to be aware of it when constructing survey or interview questions.

For this reason, the feminist participants in this study were asked 'Please describe your religious or spiritual views (including none/Atheist/Agnostic)', with both 'religious' and 'spiritual' included within the question. Additionally, when coding their responses to this question, it seemed necessary to separate the responses naming a major world religion from those expressing a search for meaning and transcendence outside of conventionally defined religious traditions. Having said this, there were a very small number of respondents who appeared to be 'fusers', as Vincett (2008) calls the feminists she interviewed who combined adherence to a religious tradition with holistic spiritualities.

Following others, I use the term 'third-wave feminism' to describe the new forms of feminist activism that have emerged several decades after the last major 'wave' of western feminism in the 1960s and 70s (Henry 2004; Gillis *et al.* 2007a; Siegel 2007). In the US, third-wave feminism is generally considered to have begun in

the early 1990s. The term has two main origins – in a planned anthology called *The Third Wave: Feminist Perspectives on Racism*, which was never actually published, and in Alice Walker's daughter Rebecca's 1992 statement to *Ms* magazine 'I am not a post-feminism feminist, I am the Third Wave' (Gillis *et al.* 2007a: xxiii-xxiv). As Dean (2009) explains, third-wave feminism both denotes a poststructuralist and postcolonial response to the legacy of second-wave feminism and functions as a generational term for young feminists; the generational connotation gained prominence in the last decade or so.

Third-wave feminism received public attention through the publication of popular books by young activists (e.g. Walker 1995; Baumgardner and Richards 2000; Hernández and Rehman 2002), but the wider movement encompasses a range of activist groups and activities including festivals, protest marches, campaigns, blogs, websites and zines (small-circulation home-made magazines). Attention to intersections of gender with ethnicity, class, sexuality, disability and (sometimes) religion is often considered a feature of third-wave feminism, but others accuse third-wave feminists of concentrating on 'sex, culture and identity' at the expense of important structural issues (Siegel 2007: 151).

In the US there has been conflict between second- and third-wave feminists: for instance Chesler's (1997) *Letters to a Young Feminist* caused consternation among young feminists for seeming to patronise them (Siegel 2007: 127-151). Henry (2004) and Looser and Kaplan (1997) discuss the evocation of the mother-daughter trope in these debates, with young feminists rebelling against their supposedly restrictive feminist mothers and older feminists accusing younger ones of being ungrateful daughters. However, while third-wave feminists tend to be younger, third-wave feminism is not entirely a generational term; people over forty are involved in third-

wave activities, just as people in their twenties are involved in feminist organisations that originated in the 1970s. ‘Third-wave feminism’ is not an uncontested term: does a new wave appear to wash away everything that went before? And does talk about feminist mothers and daughters erase other kinds of relationships between women and produce a heteronormative model of the reproduction of knowledge? These complexities do not render the term redundant, but they must be kept in view when using it (for debates about these metaphors, see Looser and Kaplan 1997; Henry 2004; Aikau *et al.* 2007; Gillis *et al.* 2007b).

UK third-wave feminism has a somewhat different character. It emerged around a decade later and has only in the last few years received academic or media attention. Like North American third-wave feminism, it is expressed through a range of activism and activities, notably festivals and conferences, local groups, issue-specific campaigns and online forums. But UK third-wavers frame their feminism more as a challenge to the contemporary post-feminist climate (Dean 2010: 3-4) than to their feminist ‘foremothers’.

The limited research on UK third-wave feminism suggests that while new technologies (especially the internet) are central to third-wave organising, its concerns and analytical frameworks are similar to those of second-wave feminism; third-wave feminists exhibit a high level of support (greater, it seems, than in the US) for radical and socialist feminist critiques of patriarchy and capitalism (Redfern and Aune 2010).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The data for this article originates from a survey sent by email to just over fifty feminist groups, with the request that they forward it to their members. All the groups had been

formed in the twenty-first century. They were selected based on information gained through attending feminist gatherings, prior knowledge, word of mouth and searching the internet. The email directed participants to an online survey or offered to send a paper version.<sup>1</sup>

The message accompanying the survey asked those who identified as feminist or pro-feminist to complete the survey. Religious and spiritual feminist groups were also approached, with varying degrees of success. For instance, there was a very limited response from Muslim women's groups, which quite possibly reflects the rejection of the term 'feminism' by many Islamic women's rights activists (see Discussion section below). Specifying that the survey was for 'feminists' or 'pro-feminists' (which we felt at the time was methodologically necessary to enable us to do research about contemporary feminists) may, regrettably, have put some people off.

Two-thirds of respondents heard about the survey through email. The remaining third completed a paper survey distributed at four feminist conferences and festivals (FEM08 and Ladyfest were the largest). After discarding spoiled or duplicate responses, 1,265 were coded and analysed using SPSS.

Many feminists are wary of quantitative methods, tending to favour the qualitative approach for its ability to promote equality between researcher and participants, give voice to women and uncover and critique power dynamics. But quantitative methods can have value in feminist research. As Hughes and Cohen (2010) argue, statistics can reveal widespread inequalities, which means that they can be harnessed by feminists to promote gender justice. Indeed, the political impetus behind our quantitative study was to produce some 'hard statistics' to counter hegemonic media and academic portrayals of feminism in the UK as a thing of the past that was irrelevant to younger people.

Participants were asked ‘Do you identify as: a) female, b) male, c) other or d) prefer not to say (please tick one)?’ Of the 1,265 participants, 91 per cent identified as female, 7 per cent as male, 1.4 per cent opted for ‘other’ and 0.6 per cent for ‘prefer not to say’. Ages ranged from 15 to 81, with almost three quarters in their twenties and thirties; the mean age was 31 and the median 27. They came from across the UK, with the largest numbers in London, Scotland, the Midlands, South East England and Yorkshire and Humberside. Their ethnicity was not unrepresentative of the UK population: 91.5 per cent were white, while the UK 2001 Census figures recorded a white population of 92.1 per cent. Compared to the UK population, a lower proportion of participants were Asian (1.9 per cent, compared to 4 per cent in the Census) and Black (0.8 per cent, compared to 2 per cent) and higher proportion was of mixed ethnicity (4.3 per cent, compared to 1.2 per cent) and from other ethnic groups. However, their responses cannot be directly compared to the Census responses because we asked them to describe their ethnicity as they wished, rather than giving them pre-defined categories, and we then categorised their responses ourselves. 60 per cent identified as heterosexual, 11 per cent as lesbian or gay, 20 per cent as bisexual and 6 per cent as something else (including queer, pansexual and asexual); 3 per cent ticked ‘prefer not to say’. They were highly educated, 90 per cent possessing or studying for an undergraduate or postgraduate degree.

A question on religious and spiritual views was included among the ‘characteristics questions’ opening the survey (age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, highest level of education and location in the UK). Participants were asked ‘Please describe your religious or spiritual views (including none/Atheist/Agnostic)’; they were given the option to check ‘prefer not to say’ (6.4 per cent did this). Two further questions, on the types of feminism respondents identified with and the feminist issues

that most interested or concerned them, included references to religion. Responses to these three questions will be explored below, with most attention given to the question on religious or spiritual views.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Religion and spirituality is a minority interest for feminists**

The questions on types of feminism respondents identified with and the feminist issues they considered important reveal religion to be a minority concern for feminists. One question asked ‘Do you particularly identify with any of the following types of feminism (tick all that apply)?’ A list of eighteen were offered, plus ‘Just identify with feminism generally’ and ‘Other’. The most popular response (picked by 614 people) was ‘Just identify with feminism generally’. After this came ‘socialist’ (363 responses), ‘academic’ (301), ‘liberal’ (296) and ‘radical’ (251). ‘Spiritual/religious’ (82) was the fifth least popular, ahead of ‘womanist’ (53), ‘trans’ (53), ‘black’ (40) and ‘separatist’ (23). The continued support for womanism is noteworthy: coined by Alice Walker, ‘womanism’ refers to black women’s struggles against injustice and often incorporates a spiritual or religious dimension. ‘Eco-feminist’, which for some feminists has a spiritual dimension (some eco-feminists see the earth as sacred), generated 163 responses.

Respondents were then asked: ‘Please list the three feminist issues that most interest or concern you.’ Three spaces were provided for them to write their answers. Responses were analysed and categories developed based on the most frequently recurring themes. Thirteen major themes were generated; anything else was coded ‘other’. Again, religion and spirituality received only a small number of responses,

being mentioned by 3.3 per cent of the survey respondents. The most frequently mentioned issues were equality at work, home and education (66.3 per cent) and violence against women (52.6 per cent).

The 3.3 per cent referred to religion in four ways. First, it appeared as one of the interlocking structures of inequality (along with class and race, for instance):

Equality for women of all races and religions in their respective countries, equal access to education, getting by on attributes not related to the body or sex.  
(female, 23 years old)

The second group of respondents simply listed the issue as ‘women in religion’ (female, 19) or ‘feminism and religion’ (female, 22). The third group – by far the largest – referred to religion negatively, as a problem for women:

Religious problems with women (female, 25)

Religious views that conflict with feminism (male, 30)

Discrimination/ill-treatment of women justified on the basis of religion or ‘tradition’ (male, 28)

A few respondents pinpointed ‘The rise of fundamentalist religions and the impact on women's rights’ (female, 43) as a particular problem. Christianity, Islam and Islamic regimes were mentioned specifically as impediments to women’s freedom:

Subordination of women in conservative religious ideology (Christian and non-Christian) (female, 27)

Religious/Muslim Oppression of women at all levels (female, 26)

Religious ideology concerning women - e.g. in the Middle East (male, 24)

Finally, a couple referred to the need for equality in religious leadership, for instance:

Equality in religion, e.g. women becoming Catholic priests (female, 23)

In sum, for these feminists religion and spirituality were considered far less important than other issues; where religion was mentioned, it was seen as something that justified injustice towards women.

### **Feminists' spiritual and religious attitudes are diverse**

Coding the responses to 'Please describe your religious or spiritual views (including none/Atheist/Agnostic)' was complicated. Feminists' views were diverse, not clear-cut. There were over two hundred different responses. Having copied the responses onto strips of paper and placed them on my dining table, it became clear that grouping them into a few discrete categories would be impossible: 'Jewish', 'Muslim', 'Christian', 'Buddhist', 'Pagan', 'Spiritual', 'Agnostic', 'Atheist', 'None'. While many did respond along those lines, listing a major world religion or writing 'Atheist', 'Agnostic', or 'None' (perhaps prompted by the phrasing of the question), at least a quarter did not.

Many of these people described themselves in some way as ‘spiritual’; based on what they wrote, I classified their spirituality into either ‘spiritual but not religious’ or ‘alternative spirituality’. Others opted for combinations (for instance of two religions, of agnosticism with religion, or of atheism with agnosticism). Figure 1 shows the spread of responses.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

These can be combined into broader categories, as in Figure 2; these are explored below.

FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

### Atheist

‘Atheist’ was by far the most popular self-designation, adopted by 39.4 per cent of the sample (this figure excludes those who saw themselves as spiritual atheists – see below). The atheist group was more than double the size of the next largest group, the agnostics. There was minimal variation in the atheists’ self-descriptions; only a very small minority expanded on ‘atheist’, a couple to clarify that they were opposed to religion – ‘anti-theist’ (male, 22) or ‘anti-religion (strong atheist)’ (female, 17) – and a couple to ‘dilute’ their assertion: ‘atheist-ish’ (female, 31) or ‘atheist – but not an arrogant one!’ (male, 23).

### Agnostic

Agnostics made up 15.7 per cent of the survey population, the second largest category. Most respondents classified as 'agnostic' simply wrote this word. A few others were placed in this category because their wording constituted another way of saying agnostic; these included 'undecided open minded' (female, 27), 'active agnostic' (female, 28), 'not sure' (female, 52) and 'haven't figured it out yet' (female, 23).

### None

15 per cent of participants wrote 'none'; this group were almost as numerous as the agnostics. Virtually no one expanded upon this statement, except for two who said they were previously Hindu and Catholic, one saying 'None. Ever' (female, 38) and one 'None/Personal' (other gender, 25).

### Major world religion

11.2 per cent supported a major religion. These were Christianity (8.7 per cent), Buddhist (0.9 per cent), Muslim (0.7 per cent), Jewish (0.6 per cent), then 'other' (which included Bahá'í and Taoist) (0.3 per cent). There were no Hindus and Sikhs, although a couple of people classified elsewhere said that they came from Hindu backgrounds.

A little under half those categorized as Christians simply wrote 'Christian'. The rest either wrote 'Quaker'<sup>2</sup>, identified themselves as Roman Catholics or Protestants, named their denomination (e.g. Anglican, Church of Scotland, Methodist) or explained what kind of Christian they were in terms of belief and/or practice:

Liberal Catholic (female, 16)

Active and committed Christian (female, 73)

Non-traditional Christian (male, 26)

Trying to be a practicing Christian (female, 45)

Heretical Christian (male, 30)

Raised a Catholic, still sort of am, but maybe not as religious (female, 20)

Christian – evangelical and practicing (ex-catholic) (female, 21)

All but one of the Buddhists and Jews just wrote ‘Buddhist’ or ‘Jewish’; the exceptions wrote ‘Philosophical Buddhist’ (female, 42) or ‘Reform Judaism’ (female, 19). All the Muslims wrote ‘Muslim’ or ‘Islam’.

Among the Christians and Muslims, a higher percentage identified as heterosexual (77.7 per cent of Christians and 87.5 per cent of Muslims, as against 59.8 per cent in the whole sample).

### Spiritual

The responses of 4.4 per cent placed them in the ‘spiritual but not religious’ grouping.

These included:

Not religious but consider myself and the world to be ‘spiritual’ (female, 27)

Spiritual (female, 35)

Mild spiritualism/ cynicism (other gender, 19)

Spiritual: *Conversations with God* is my ‘Bible’ (female, 26)

Definite spirituality, don't have a name-tag for it (female, 23)

I believe in God but am not part of any church (female, 26)

Believe in something, which may or may not be God, which I think is the power  
of good in all of us (female, 63)

A further 3.2 per cent identified with alternative, 'New Age' or earth-based spirituality. This included Pagans (the main sub-group), Wiccans, Pantheists and several others. This group featured, for instance:

Pagan (female, 48)

Pagan...not wiccan (female, 46)

Pagan pantheist (other gender, 18)

Wiccan (female, 54)

Dianic – I also identify with the terms pagan, neo-pagan, witch (or Wytch),  
Goddess spirituality or Goddessian, feminist spirituality, Earth-based  
spirituality and Womanspirit (female 35)

I'm a Yoga Teacher...☺ (female, 34)

Within this grouping, lesbian/gay and bisexual respondents were over-represented. There were no men in either the 'spiritual but not religious' or 'alternative spirituality' groupings.

Other

For the quarter whose responses did not fit an established category, three tendencies are noteworthy: the merging and blurring of categories; the difficulties in self-definition; and accounting for former religious commitments.

Merging was a feature of some responses. Some considered themselves 'spiritual atheist' (several respondents), 'atheist with pagan moments' (female, 43) or 'atheist pagan (sounds weird, completely true!' (female, 28). Some opted for a combination of two or three of 'atheist', 'agnostic', 'none' or 'humanist': for instance 'humanist, atheist, agnostic' (male, 28) and 'atheist/agnostic...it wavers' (female 18). A couple, including a 65-year-old female who wrote 'a mix –Buddhist/ shamanic/ Christian', combined two or more religions. Some considered themselves agnostic (or even atheist) as well as religious:

Atheist as well as Secular Catholic (female, 34)

Culturally Jewish agnostic (female, 35)

Agnostic but thinking of joining a C of E church (female, 27)

Buddhist by birth but agnostic verging on atheist by practice (female, 32)

Difficulties in labelling spiritual attitudes was apparent for some, as evident in some of the responses below, most of which were coded as 'other':

Believe in God but don't affiliate with an organised religion (female, age withheld)

Unorthodox spiritual (female, 51)

Confused (female, 61)

Personal (female, 44)

Nearly all religions until they say they are the only way (female, 59)

Vague (female, 46)

Some had been religious but were so no longer. Evidently, their former religiosity retains sufficient salience for them to mention it. Former or 'lapsed'

Catholics dominated this group:

Ex-catholic (female, 53)

Raised Christian, now have no spiritual views (female, 25)

Lapsed catholic spiritual agnostic with pagan leanings (female, 24)

Brought up Hindu, now atheist (female, 22)

### Humanist

1.9 per cent were humanists; a few of these used the term 'secular humanist'. The majority of humanists were not heterosexual.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **How do feminists compare to other people in the UK?**

The feminists' responses to 'Please describe your religious or spiritual views (including none/Atheist/Agnostic)' differ markedly from those of the general female population.

Before clarifying how feminists differ, other recent surveys of religiosity in Britain need examining.

## TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Table 1 shows the responses women gave in the 2001 England and Wales Census to the question ‘What is your religion?’<sup>3</sup> Over three-quarters of women opted for one of the major religions. But this should not be taken at face value. Asking ‘What is your religion?’ and providing check boxes corresponding to the major UK religions, ‘None’ and ‘Any other religion, *please write in*’ presupposes that respondents *have* a religion, so is somewhat of a leading question. The Census categories neglect people who consider themselves spiritual but not religious, or whose religion is not singular – for instance, people of Chinese ethnicity often combine veneration of ancestors with elements of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism (Weller 2004). The Census responses therefore require interrogation; to discover levels of religiosity in the female population, other research needs to be examined.

The 2007 British Social Attitudes survey – while much smaller, with 2,127 female participants – has a much higher ‘No religion’ figure (40.2 per cent) in response to the question ‘Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?’ (figures cited are for women only). 54.2 per cent ticked Christian, and the figures for other religions were similar to the Census figures ([www.britsocat.com](http://www.britsocat.com)).

Surveys of religious practice show lower rates of religiosity. The 1999 UK data from the European Values Surveys found 61 per cent saying they believed in God but 19 per cent saying they went to church at least monthly (Lambert 2004). Surveys which actually count the numbers of people going through the doors of churches on a typical Sunday show lower numbers still; the English Church Attendance survey found 6.3 per cent of the population attending on one Sunday in 2005 (Brierley 2006: 12.2).

Bringing together the three dimensions of belonging, belief and behaviour, Voas and Day conclude that a quarter of British people are religious, a quarter are unreligious and the remaining half are something in between. They explain:

The dominant British attitude towards religion, then, is not one of rejection or hostility. Many of those in the large middle group who are neither religious nor unreligious are willing to identify with a religion, are open to the existence of God or a higher power, may use the church for rites of passage and might pray at least occasionally. What seems apparent, though, is that religion plays a very minor role (if any) in their lives. (Voas and Day 2007:103)

Yet this analysis does not really incorporate the various manifestations of spirituality found among the 'neither religious nor irreligious' half of the population. While it remains relatively un-measured, spirituality (outside institutional religion or in the form of various holistic, Pagan, alternative or 'New Age' spiritualities) has increased in the UK in recent decades, as it has in other post-industrial countries (Houtman and Aupers 2008). In a study of Kendal, a town in north-west England, Heelas and Woodhead (2005) documented every place of worship or spiritual practice, aiming to test the claim that a 'spiritual revolution' is underway, in which alternative spirituality is eclipsing Christianity. They found that only 2-3 per cent of Kendal residents were involved in alternative spiritualities, but this had grown by 300 per cent during the 1990s, when church attendance fell from 11 per cent to 7.9 per cent. Most people involved in alternative spiritualities were women. Heelas and Woodhead conclude that if trends continue, alternative spirituality will eclipse Christianity within

the next thirty years; a spiritual revolution has not yet taken place, but there is a reasonable likelihood that it will do so.

With this context in place, feminists' religious and spiritual views can be compared with those of the general female population. First, however, a caveat: as in all surveys, how the feminism survey question was phrased will have affected the responses. By enquiring about 'religious or spiritual views', the intention was to make the question open, able to include spirituality, not just institutional religion, and probe attitudes rather than practices. The words '(including none/Atheist/Agnostic)' were included to steer clear of presuming a religion (as the 2001 Census question did). However, it is possible that by suggesting the options 'none/Atheist/Agnostic', respondents may have been led towards those three options; perhaps this partially accounts for the high number of atheist, agnostic and 'none' responses. These qualifications notwithstanding, compared to women in general:

*Feminists are significantly less supportive of traditional religion.*<sup>4</sup> They are less likely to support Christianity and Islam and more likely to be atheist or agnostic or have no religion. A sizeable minority are religious, mostly Christian, but this is lower than in the general population. The figures for atheism are particularly high. However, the figures for Buddhism (slightly more popular with feminists than in the Census), Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism (less popular with feminists) and Judaism (broadly similar) are too small to make any meaningful comparisons.

*Feminists are somewhat more supportive of alternative and non-institutional spiritualities.* The proportion that support alternative forms of spirituality such as Wicca, Paganism or Pantheism, as well as those who considered themselves spiritual but not religious, is somewhat higher than in the Census or the Kendal study. However, involvement in non-institutional spiritualities is hard to measure and done less

frequently than, say, attendance at places of worship; therefore the assertion that feminists are more likely than women in general to support non-religious spiritualities is tentative.

### **Why do feminists differ?**

These findings – that feminists are significantly less supportive of traditional religion and somewhat more supportive of alternative and non-institutional spiritualities – need to be accounted for. In what follows, I suggest that three interconnected factors help explain this: feminism's alignment with secularism, secularization and feminism's role within it, and feminism's association with alternative spiritualities.

While most feminists of the second wave did not address religion and spirituality specifically, when they did, their approaches fell broadly into four camps: *religious reformists* sought equal opportunities within existing religious structures; *religious revisionists* reinterpreted religion through the lens of women's experiences and restructured it accordingly; *spiritual revolutionaries* rejected institutional religion in favour of a woman-centred spirituality that sacralizes the female body; and *secular feminists* advocated the separation of religion and state and frequently rejected religion and spirituality (at least for themselves). See Redfern and Aune 2010: 153-169 for a discussion of these approaches.

### Feminism's alignment with secularism

The arguments of this last group, secular feminists (represented in the contemporary UK by feminist journalists such as Yasmin Alibhai-Brown and Polly Toynbee and

organizations like Women Against Fundamentalism, the National Secular Society and Southall Black Sisters), resonated with, and were taken on board by – even if on an unexamined level – many second-wave feminists who did not consciously explore spiritual questions. Only very recently have scholars representing what Braidotti (2008) calls ‘the postsecular turn’ in feminist theory uncovered and critiqued the secularist assumptions underpinning second-wave feminism. Secularism, defined by Davie and Woodhead (2009: 525) as ‘an ideology...which actively opposes religion’, exists in two versions. In its ‘softer’ version, secularism simply advocates a complete separation between religion and state, so that religion is given no role or influence in politics. In its ‘harder’ version (represented by writers like Richard Dawkins) secularism holds that religion is ‘a dangerous illusion which should ideally be eliminated from both public and private life and certainly not encouraged’ (Davie and Woodhead 2009: 525). As Braidotti (2008: 3) demonstrates, notwithstanding the work of religious and spiritual feminists, ‘the bulk of European feminism is justified in claiming to be secular in the structural and historical sense of the term’. As heirs of Enlightenment rationalism and its critique of religion, essentialist and socialist or Marxist feminists, in particular, carried forward this legacy into the second wave. There are two aspects, Braidotti (2008: 4) argues, to feminism’s secular legacy: the first concerns separating religion from the state (hence confining it to the private realm), and the second involves an ‘entrenched form of anti-clericalism’ which manifests itself in a critique of the Christian church. But this secularism has, she feels, nothing to offer in a new and globalized environment of Islamophobia, creationism and conservative religious gender and sexual ideals. Secularism fails to address the complexity of different religions and their place in women’s lives.

A new group of scholars are critiquing feminist secularism (in addition to those below, see Fernandes 2003 and Longman 2008). Perhaps the most significant problem of misunderstanding concerns Muslim women. The secularist narrative of Islam as oppressive ignores the existence of Islamic feminism (Badran 2009) and fails to understand the ways in which Islamic faith empowers women, whether in western cultures where wearing the hijab or face veil is about asserting a place in the public sphere (Afshar 2008; Schmidt 2008) or in Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt where women's subjectivities are brought into being through disciplined habits, moral dispositions and bodily practices (for instance docility, modest clothing and veiling) in a way that problematizes feminist assumptions about agency. Mahmood (2005) argues that the agency of women in Islamic revivalist groups renders problematic secularist feminist notions of agency only as autonomy or resistance to gender norms. In fact, agency can be found in places where secular feminists have assumed it must be absent.

Feminism's secularity has led some religious 'feminists' to refuse the term. For instance, Muslim women's rights activist Amina Wadud (2006: 79-80) explains that she never describes herself as a feminist, on grounds of ethnicity and religion:

...my work is certainly feminist, but I still refuse to self-designate as feminist, even with 'Muslim' put in front of it, because my emphasis on faith and the sacred prioritize my motivations in feminist methodologies. Besides, as an African-American, the original feminist paradigms were not intended to include me, as all the works on Womanism have soundly elucidated.

Second-wave feminism has had a major impact on contemporary, third-wave feminism, so it is probable that its secularist leanings, like its critique of patriarchy and

capitalism, will have influenced today's, often younger, feminists. Additionally, significant numbers of third-wave feminists are attracted to left-wing and/or socialist politics, so the somewhat greater dismissal of religion by those with left-of-centre views (Voas and Day 2007: 107) may be a further factor in disinclining feminists towards religion.

### Secularization and feminism's role within it

If secularism is the ideology advocating the dismissal of religion from public prominence, secularization is the term given to the process of religious decline in modern societies. In Wilson's (1966: xiv) formulation, it is 'the process whereby religious thinking, practices and institutions lose social significance'. While there is not space for a detailed debate about how far secularization has occurred and whether a religious resurgence is also underway (texts exploring these issues include Berger, 1999; Bruce 2002; Martin 2005; Joas and Wiegandt 2009), it is clear that there has been a decline in traditional religious affiliation, attendance and belief in the UK. Moreover, successive birth cohorts are less religiously committed, with the result that younger people are the least religious of all. Family upbringing is important, but even then only half of young adults brought up by two religious parents stay religious themselves (Voas and Crockett 2005).

The role of feminism in secularization must be considered. Recently, a group of authors have shown that secularization is a gendered phenomenon (Aune *et al.* 2008; Brown 2001; Marler 2008; Woodhead 2005, 2008). As western societies industrialized from the mid eighteenth century, work and home – and the tasks of men and women – became separated. Women and religion were relegated to the private sphere,

increasingly marginalized from political and economic life. While women found it easy to be religious, since religion supported and catered to their lives in the predominantly private sphere, men did not, and it is men who experienced the major effects of secularization. The higher rates of churchgoing among women illustrate this.

In the twentieth century, western societies became more secular, with lower rates of churchgoing, baptisms, attendance at Sunday Schools and so forth (Brown 2001). But, Brown shows, the real downturn occurred from the 1960s and began particularly affecting women in the decades that followed. At this time, feminist and sexual liberationist discourses began competing with the Christian discourse associating femininity with submission to husbands, a life of service and obedience to religious authority. Eventually, feminist narratives of sexual freedom and liberation from patriarchal gender roles took over from the Christian ones. As the churches lost authority in defining women's roles, they found that women were no longer attending in their previous numbers. Thus feminism, in providing a discourse of femininity that challenged traditional religion, helped lead women away from it.

Feminism is certainly not the only factor in women's secularization. A second is declining fertility rates; with conversion into a religion relatively rare, much church decline can be attributed to Christian women having fewer children (Voas and Crockett 2005). Another factor is paid employment. More occupied in paid work, women have less time for religious activities. UK and US survey data demonstrates that today, the women who remain religious tend to be in traditional gender roles, as wives and mothers and not in full-time employment, while women employed full-time are much less likely to be religious (Woodhead 2005; Marler 2008). A further factor is family diversity: the family forms that are growing – singleness, lone-parent families, cohabitation, blended families – are those that are under-provided-for, even

discouraged, by traditional religion (Aune 2008). Linked to this is sexuality – women’s sexual lives today fit less and less well with the religious ideal of abstinence until heterosexual marriage (Sharma 2008). Most, if not all, of these factors are tied up with feminism – for instance, it is feminists who argued for women’s ability to control their fertility, to work outside the home and to enter lesbian or non-married sexual relationships.

So how might this explain the low support for traditional religion amongst the feminism survey respondents? First, as predominantly younger people they inhabit an increasingly secularized environment and are less likely to have been socialized into a religion than their parents and grandparents. Second, as feminists, they are unlikely to endorse the traditional gender roles favoured by religions, and unlikely to be located in the groups of women who are still religiously affiliated: those in heterosexual marriages, with children and looking after the home rather than working full-time. Their lives will probably, in one way or another, have deviated from religious discourses of femininity, and thus there is no ‘natural fit’ between them and traditional religion. To take just one example, the proportion of feminists who are non-heterosexual is high, at 40 per cent; it is unlikely that these people would find a comfortable home in traditional religious groups.

### Feminism’s association with alternative spiritualities

Since the 1960s, a wide range of spiritual philosophies, products and activities have emerged. Together they make up the alternative, New Age or ‘cultic milieu’ (Campbell 1972). With roots in the nineteenth-century occult and esoteric movements and the 1960s counter culture, angels, crystals, Feng Sui, horoscopes, human potential

movements, meditation, Reiki, Satanism, Western versions of Taoism and Zen are some of its manifestations. There has also been a rise in identification with spirituality outside religion, whether through what Davie (1994) calls 'believing without belonging' or through a 'progressive spirituality' (Lynch 2007) that sees the earth as sacred and works for social change across and beyond institutional religion. Crucially, alternative spiritualities have mostly attracted women. 80 per cent of participants in holistic spirituality in Kendal were 'white, middle-class women aged over forty' (Woodhead 2008: 156). Surveys of pagans in Canada, the US, the UK and New Zealand reveal that women outnumber men by about two to one (Reid 2008). Why is this, and what, if any, connection does alternative spirituality have with feminism?

Feminism was, from the start, at the core of alternative spirituality. From Carol Christ's 1978 address 'Why women need the Goddess?', in which she argued that women need a female symbol of divinity to affirm women and connect their experiences and bodies to the supernatural (Christ 1979), feminist spirituality has spread into a range of pagan, Wiccan, Goddess-focused forms of spirituality and cultic milieu activities (Eller 1993). Interviewing Canadian pagans, Reid (2008) was often told that Goddess spirituality attracted them because it provides an image of divine femininity. Along with religious reformists, religious revisionists and secular feminists, spiritual revolutionaries (or spiritual feminists), constitute one of the four main feminist groupings among second-wave feminists working on religion and spirituality. Less a regular structured community group (it is not a church where weekly attendance is expected) than a collection of products and events for individuals to select as they wish, New Age spirituality fits well with the individualized, consumerist environment of late or postmodern societies.

Houtman and Aupers (2008: 110) suggest that it is appealing to women because women inhabit a detraditionalized environment where they have experienced rapid role change: 'Post-traditional women are...more likely than post-traditional men to be haunted by the questions of meaning and identity that are evoked by detraditionalization...[They] are more likely...to embark on a spiritual quest and sacralize their selves.' For Woodhead (2008: 15), the gender revolution is incomplete, and women today, especially the highly educated, are 'caught in a web of contradictions between two incompatible models of selfhood – the independent, entitled self and the other-referential, caring self'. New Age spirituality helps women negotiate that tension, emphasising the importance of relationality and care for the self. Moreover, the New Age view that humans are inherently spiritual and sacred and must act to free the 'socialized self' from layers of indoctrination by society (Heelas 1996: 18-19) dovetails with the feminist notion of gender as a social construction that should be challenged in order for women to be freed from social and patriarchal pressures. Hence not only does alternative spiritual suit feminists because they are living detraditionalized lives, but its core philosophy, the liberation of the self from negative socialization and others' expectations, is also very similar.

Spiritualities that are perhaps less specific than New Age or neo-paganism have also found favour with feminists. These span, for instance, the spiritual activism of Gloria Anzaldua (Keating 2008), the spiritual rituals of Canadian anti-capitalist activists (Zwissler 2007, 2009) and the Gather the Women global network. Seeing spirituality as 'a transcendent sense of interconnection that moves beyond the knowable, visible material world' (Fernandes 2003: 10), these feminists believe that spirituality enables them to approach activism with joy rather than anger, giving them energy to heal the world through transforming the self and relationship with others.

## CONCLUSION

As the first quantitative study of the spiritual and religious views of a large group of feminists, this study has uncovered a complex picture. For most third-wave feminists in the UK, religion and spirituality are areas of only limited interest or concern. Yet this does not mean that feminists are simply indifferent or hostile to questions of transcendence and ultimate meaning. While just over half of the feminists surveyed – a larger proportion than in the wider population – identify as atheists or have no religion, the rest are either agnostic or express some support for spirituality or religion.

I have argued that feminists' significantly reduced support for institutional religion and their increased support for alternative spiritualities can, at least partly, be accounted for by three factors: feminism's alignment with secularism, secularization and feminism's role within it, and feminism's association with alternative spiritualities. This thesis needs further testing. One question is the cross-cultural applicability of this study and its analysis: do (any of) these findings hold for feminists in other countries, and if so which? Other post-industrial countries might show similar patterns, but most likely with major differences. For instance, theories of secularization do not hold in the same way for the US as for Europe, and even within Europe there are considerable variations in religiosity (relating partly to nation states' different histories and relationships with religion). Surveying feminists' (if indeed that term is used) attitudes to religion in majority Muslim or Buddhist countries would probably require the survey question and analysis to be framed very differently; for one thing, they would need to be more attentive to the intersections between religion, ethnicity and nation.

Even for UK feminists, unanswered questions remain. Qualitative investigation is needed to discover more about feminists' attitudes to religion, to probe how they are formed and ascertain what role feminism has in influencing their views about religion and spirituality. Equally, what role do religion and spirituality play in feminists' identities and activities? Does religion inspire or discourage feminist activism? How do feminists' spiritual views intersect with ethnicity, social class, age and sexuality? Qualitative research might also discover more about what self-designations as 'atheist', 'agnostic' or 'Buddhist' actually mean and how these are lived out in daily life. 'Agnostic', for instance, might embrace a range of positions, from the woman who has thought little about religion to the woman who reads religious literature and meditates daily but is not entirely sure that God exists.

It is useful also to consider what these findings might indicate about feminists' future interaction with religion and spirituality. Given that spirituality and religion were mentioned by very few survey participants as major feminist issues, it is likely that religion and spirituality will remain on the margins of feminist activism and scholarship. A minority of feminists, especially those who have spiritual commitments or who oppose religion's more oppressive manifestations, will continue to focus on it. For most others, in a secularizing society like the UK, it will be increasingly seen as irrelevant for feminism, except when political institutions seek to use or fund religious groups to achieve economic, social or political benefits (for instance, faith schools).

There is no single feminist perspective on religion and spirituality, which means there will not be agreement about the implications of these survey findings for women's relationship with spirituality and religion. From a religious feminist perspective, it is regrettable that feminists tend not to be religiously affiliated, since if feminists are not involved with religious communities, they will not be able to reform them for the better.

Recent victories for women within religion – like winning the right to become Priests and Bishops in the Anglican Church – would probably not have occurred if feminists had not fought from within their religions for these changes. Yet some secular feminists would respond that religion is too oppressive to be redeemed, and propping up an oppressive institution is doing nothing for the cause of gender equality. For them, news that feminists are less religious than the general population may be greeted positively, as evidence of a strong collective voice striving for equality in other more important areas, rather than being distracted by less material concerns. And spiritual revolutionary feminists will surely welcome the news that significant numbers of feminists are involved in alternative spiritualities, since they believe spirituality can contribute to the cultural revaluation of women's bodies and help women achieve more fulfilled lives.

This survey provides a snap-shot view of UK third-wave feminists' views of religion and spirituality, located as they are in a society where expressions of religion, spirituality, feminism and gender have changed rapidly. Whether the next fifty years will see as much change as the past fifty is unclear, but what is certain is that feminism, religion and spirituality will remain – necessarily – inseparable from the social contexts in which they are located.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The principal researchers were Catherine Redfern, founder of the popular UK-based feminist website *The F Word*, and me. I am a Christian feminist with an academic background in women's studies and sociology of religion. Rose Holyoak was employed as a part-time research assistant and assisted with survey administration, coding and data input.

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<sup>2</sup> Although there are a number of Quakers who do not consider themselves traditionally religious or who identify with religions like Buddhism, Quakers were placed in the Christian category because of Quakerism's Christian roots.

<sup>3</sup> Figures are for women rather than the general population because, since 91 per cent of our survey respondents identified as female, using Census figures for women enables a more accurate comparison.

<sup>4</sup> In what follows I use the words 'supportive of' almost interchangeably with 'involved in' and avoid terms like 'belong to' or 'practice'. This is intentional. Because of the way we phrased the question, I do not have information about affiliation to religious or spiritual organizations, or about religious practices (e.g. frequency of prayer). A follow-up qualitative study (currently underway) will provide information on affiliation and practice.

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## **TABLES AND FIGURES**

Figure 1: Feminists' religious or spiritual views. Missing responses have been excluded from calculations

Figure 2: Feminists' religious or spiritual views (broad categories). Missing responses have been excluded from calculations

Table 1: Women's responses to 'what is your religion?', Census (2001), England and Wales (percentages)