

Review of Kirsten Aune, Sonya Sharma & Giselle Vincett (eds.), *Women and Religion in the West: Challenging Secularization*, Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing 2008, 230 pages, ISBN 978-0-7546-5870-2.

BY NELLA VAN DEN BRANDT, GHENT UNIVERSITY

Since recent years, many academic and public discussions evolve round the role of religion and religious identities in current modern secularized Western societies. Across national boundaries, women and their identities, social status and bodies have received a central place in these debates. The emancipation of women – or the lack of it – often appears as a central theme. Islam, then, has become, in the eyes of many, inherently opposed to freedom, democracy and gender equality, values that are the supposed hallmarks of secular societies.

The book *Women and Religion in the West: Challenging Secularization*, edited by Kirstin Aune, Sonya Sharma, and Giselle Vincett, should be placed within the context of academic debates and critical research on the intersections between religion, secularism and gender. The book is the fifth volume of the *Theology and Religion in Interdisciplinary Perspective Series*, published in association with the Sociology of Religion Study Group of the British Sociological Association (BSA). The editorial introduction makes clear that the book should be situated not only within the field of sociology of religion, but within larger cross-disciplinary debates as well – in feminist studies on religion, gender, feminism and multiculturalism. The editors explicitly proceed from the assumption that secularization in the Western world is a given arisen from the assemblage

of modern ways of thinking. However, diverging from classical sociological secularization theories, they do not suggest that cultures should *necessarily* secularize in order to modernize (p 1). They aim to bring secularization theories into 'dialogue with women's religiosity'. The book is therefore offered as a contribution to the gendering of sociology's secularization theories (p 14), based on the insight that: 'Women pose a challenge to secularization theories: we must go beyond one-size-fits-all theories to understand the complex interconnections between women, religion and secularization in the West' (p 15).

The book employs two strategies towards more balanced secularization theories (p 4). The first is the strategy of 'adding' women's stories to existing theories, as suggested, for example, by Penny Long Marler in chapter 1. She argues that religious change in the West is strongly influenced by long-term changes in women's lives, which have their origins in demographic transitions accompanying the industrial revolution and the gendered division of labor closely related to it (p 23). Secondly, taking the diverging gender dynamics of historical developments into account may lead to the more radical strategy of criticizing and reforming secularization theories. An example is chapter 10 by Sarah Bracke, in which she studies the construction of religious subjectivity among young Muslim women in Kazan, the capital of the Republic of Tatarstan in Russia, and reconceptualizes dominant notions of religion, secularization and the dichotomy of modernity and tradition (p 193).

The book has three parts: Christianity, Alternative Spiritualities and Islam, all three including four chapters dealing with women's gendered negotiations concerning religion and spirituality within respectively Christian, alternative or Islamic traditions. This set-up calls for exploring questions regarding secularization processes in relation to different cultural and faith backgrounds. Starting in part I with a focus on Christian women, part II shifts attention towards investigating female alternative spiritualities. Its contributions demonstrate that women leaving the church need not leave religion and spirituality altogether. At times women find solace in alternative spiritualities. Chapter 6, by Sian Reid, shows that alternative spiritualities provide women with symbols and narratives that they can use as references for identification, inspiration, and empowerment, and to express their fundamental continuous bonding with the sacred (p 129). Part III shifts the focus of attention to women's religiosity in Islam. Its contributions reveal the ethnocentrism of classical secularization theories, which are often limited in scope to the particular white and Christian (male) experience. Questioning secularization theories

in relation to women from other than Christian religious backgrounds leads to new insights on multiple levels. Not only gender, but also the dimensions of ethnic and cultural background and social position inform experiences of and dealing with religion and secularism.

Each of the three parts of the book is organized as follows. The first chapter offers an interpretation of statistics on women and religious belongings. The chapters by Penny Long Marler, Dick Houtman and Stef Aupers, and Serena Hussain give the reader some idea of the number of women connected to different religious affinities in particular Western nation states. In chapter 9, Serena Hussain explores the possibility of investigating statistically the question of whether and to what extent Muslim women in Britain are more religious compared to women with other religious backgrounds. She compares levels of integration into the labour market to explain differences in religiosity between Muslim and non-Muslim women (p 180). The contributions that follow the quantitative investigations are based on in-depth qualitative research. They aim to grasp women's social and religious experiences within respectively Christianity, alternative spiritualities and Islam. In chapter 3, Sonya Sharma examines the impact of their membership of Protestant church communities on the sexual personality of young women in Canada. She argues that one of the reasons for young women to abandon their churches lies in the fact that the church does not acknowledge equality of gender identities nor equality of women's and men's sexual practices (p 81).

In chapter 8, Linda Woodhead investigates formations of selfhood emerging from women's current social lives and their religious and spiritual practices informed by Christianity or alternative spiritualities. She demonstrates that institutionalized Christianity propagates an ambivalent image of womanhood, which leads a number of white middle-aged and middle class women to engage in alternative forms of spirituality that offer them more space to develop a holistic personality (p 156-158). Woodhead concludes that the ability of different forms of religion to provide women with resources in dealing with the dilemmas of selfhood may have a significant bearing on the success of these religious forms (p 159). In chapter 12, Garbi Schmidt discusses Muslim women's formations of selfhood and empowerment in the US in relation to both their Muslim communities and the larger society. She concludes that Muslim women reinterpret their religion within different spaces, in which their activist projects become legitimated as part of an authentic Islam. With openness about their religious practices and vulnerabilities they demonstrate their

loyalty to the (secular) nation. These women question the divide between the private and the public as a strategy towards gaining power and recognition (p 217).

This consistent sequence of introduction, statistics and in-depth qualitative analysis works very clear and informative. However, I felt that not all of the individual contributions explicitly link their insights in women's formation of religiosity and selfhood to secularization theories. For this reason sometimes contributions to the overarching theoretical framework remain inarticulated and out of sight. In those cases, the reader has to make the effort of relating the contribution to secularization theories herself by asking: does it merely add women's experiences to secularization theories, or are there instances of more radical critique of these theories? I found that the contributions by Linda Woodhead and Sarah Bracke stood out for their critical engagement with secularization theories.

The primary contribution of the book lies in further empirically specifying the general insight that gender is a constructive aspect of how people as groups or as individuals are part of larger socio-historical developments such as secularization. Drawing upon women's voices and lived realities, it provides a well-founded critique of generalizing narratives about 'religion', 'secularism' and 'emancipation'. It also allows for comparative insights as the contributions are based upon the diverging experiences of women from various religious/secular, cultural, ethnic and national backgrounds. The book is therefore a must-read for those interested in comprehensive empirical accounts of the intersections between gender, religion, secularization and other 'markers' of sociopolitical differences.