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From Angel in the Home to Sacred Prostitute: Unconditional Love and Gendered Hierarchies in Contemporary Spirituality

Anna Fedele and Kim Knibbe

This chapter describes how people learn to reconceptualize gender and sexuality through engaging with contemporary spirituality. The focus will be on the actual practices and processes whereby this is done, with the intent to go beyond the self-descriptions of spiritual discourses about gender and sexuality. Our aim is to show how spiritual practices, often described as liberating and empowering, may create new gendered hierarchies. Furthermore, we argue that in order to fully understand contemporary spiritual practitioners and their conceptualizations of gender and sexuality, it is important to contextualize these against the background of the cultural and religious environment they grew up in (Fedele 2013; Fedele and Knibbe 2013; Knibbe 2013a). We will show that spirituality, and the new

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ways of relating to oneself, the world and others it entails, is often in dialectical tension with this background, paradoxically keeping it alive while breaking with it. In the cases described below, we show how the Catholic virtue of a “pure” and “unselfish” love as associated with motherhood and the role of women is explicitly worked on and embedded within new ideals of gendered personhood within contemporary spirituality.

We use the term spiritual practitioners to refer to a wide range of people associated with New Age, Neopaganism and some “New Religious Movements”¹ who identify as spiritual, thereby distinguishing themselves from people who are “only” religious or not religious at all (Fedele and Knibbe 2013). Spiritual practitioners often describe their experiences in terms of an all-pervading life force they call “energy” and tend to create their own spiritual patchwork, assembling together different theories, techniques and figures (among others: Bender 2010; Pike 2004). Knibbe (2013a) has characterized the ways in which people engage with this domain of spiritual practices, workshops, séances, books, and so on as a way to work on the modes of relating to religious authority and to others based on her research among spiritual practitioners in a Catholic region in the Netherlands. In her work on Mary Magdalene pilgrims in Southern Europe, Fedele (2013) also found that the criticism that these women and men engage in should be understood in relation to their Catholic background. As many scholars studying contemporary forms of spirituality have shown, spiritual practitioners often explicitly or implicitly criticize “traditional” or mainstream religions for being intrinsically misogynistic and patriarchal (see for an overview Fedele and Knibbe 2013, chap. 1).

In contrast, discourses and practices identified as “spiritual” offer women new ways to conceptualize their body and find a more positive access to bodily processes such as menstruation, childbirth, breastfeeding, or menopause (Fedele 2013; Salomonsen 2002; Pike 2001). Although spiritual practitioners target Christianity and the negative Christian stereotypes they associate with the female body especially, instead of rejecting Christian figures and concepts completely, their meaning is often inverted and given a positive meaning related to corporeality (Fedele 2014).

These inversions and the ways in which spiritual practitioners use dichotomies and essentialized notions of femininity and masculinity raise the question whether they do not in some way reproduce some of the so-called “patriarchal structures” they aim to subvert. Susan Starr Sered has distinguished between “Woman” as symbol and “women” as actual persons to show how gender ideologies are linked to religious cosmologies.

Sometimes these cosmologies objectify women and enforce rules on them to make them conform to symbols of the gendered hierarchies while at other times they grant them agency and consciousness.

We think that the claims of contemporary “spirituality” to offer (gendered) empowerment and to be free from the “traditional” gendered hierarchies (in contrast to “religion”) should be approached critically. Spirituality can empower women offering new roles and figures of reference, but sometimes it can also end up reproducing gender stereotypes or gendered domination or even lead to cases of abuse (Jacobs 2007; Jacobs 1991; Werczberger 2013).² As scholars, we should not only reproduce the self-descriptions of spiritual practitioners and how they aim to subvert gender hierarchies, but also critically assess the outcome of these projects (Fedele and Knibbe 2013, 13). What gender ideologies and gendered hierarchies are created in the context of contemporary spirituality where these are (ritually, bodily, biographically, emotionally) worked on or negated?

In this chapter, we will discuss this question and the problematics associated with it through two ethnographic case studies. Despite the differences in context (one situated in Northern Europe, the other one in Southern Europe) and the inherent diversity of the field of contemporary spirituality, we found significant parallels between the ways ideals around love, gender and sexuality are reworked in these contexts. In the following, we will compare and contrast these parallels. As we will show, the new understandings of womanhood, love and sexuality proposed within contemporary spirituality in fact resolve but also perpetuate some underlying tensions that derived from contradictory demands between the ideals transmitted through a traditional Catholic upbringing and secular, modernist notions of personhood. In this, as in many other religious as well as secular contexts, a discourse on gender equality does not necessarily imply the enactment of such equality. Understanding the problems that emerge in the spiritual practitioners’ efforts to oppose and find alternatives to the gendered stereotypes of their Catholic upbringing may help us to better analyze similar situations in other religious, as well as in secular contexts.

CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALITY AND GENDERED EMPOWERMENT

As mentioned before, the spiritual practitioners in the two ethnographic contexts analyzed by Fedele and Knibbe share a notion of gendered empowerment against the background of a Catholic upbringing.

It is important to note that generally, gendered empowerment within spiritual circles is conceptualized differently from the “secular” feminist ideal. One important factor is the frequent reference to (divine) energies. As we have mentioned before, spiritual practitioners conceptualize the phenomenological world as consisting of energy,³ which means everything is connected. Like the rest of planet Earth, the human body is permeated by this divine, immanent force. One aspect that to secular feminists might be problematic is that male and female energies are seen as qualitatively different, often complimentary in some ways. Although men and women are thought to harbor both types of energy (Brown 1997; Fedele 2013:59–82), the potential for essentializing gender differences is certainly present.

Many spiritual practitioners, like secular feminists, problematize the Judeo-Christian heritage as involving a stigmatization of the body (and by extension the material world) as impure and corrupt, providing the ideological ground that fostered the domination of women and nature (among others: Fedele and Blanes 2011; Pike 2001). Again, they differ from secular feminism in the solution they create: The spiritual practices developed within this field aim at reconceptualizing and healing the damage that has been wrought by this Judeo-Christian heritage as can be seen explicitly in one of the cases described below.

Although not all exponents of contemporary spirituality share the same attitudes toward body and sexuality, it can be said that the conceptualization and celebration of the body (and especially the female body) as sacred is an important feature. Furthermore, spiritual development is thought to be the central task for both women and men. The patriarchal nature of these institutions is thought to impede the spiritual development of people, most obviously of women, but also of men. In both of the cases described below, “traditional” Catholic gendered models of relating to others are criticized and reworked to create a more “liberating” ideal of personhood and love. Although each of these cases works on different aspects of Catholic gender models, they have in common a focus on “unconditional love” and how this should be (re)conceptualized. Through these descriptions, we wish to raise questions not only on how these more liberating ideals of personhood/womanhood work out in practice but also on how “religion” and spirituality are dialectically related to each other. How does spirituality integrate references to “traditional” religion (i.e. “churched” religion) as a contrasting background to lend salience and relevance to its practices? We will return to these questions in the concluding paragraphs.

ANGEL IN THE HOME

During Knibbe's fieldwork in the south of the Netherlands, the tension between old and new ideals of personhood for women was a recurring topic. Part of this fieldwork took place in a "spiritual group". The south of the Netherlands still is a predominantly Catholic region. Figures from early surveys show percentages of 95–98 percent Catholics (Knippenberg 1992, 174), and despite secularization, Catholics are in the majority in the south until now. Until the early 1960s, the Catholic Church brought more and more areas of life under its control through a dense network of organizations and promoted sacralized gender ideologies. Schools were run by the "active congregations", that is, nuns and friars. There was a lot of concern with the proper upbringing of youth in terms of sexuality, and a rather strict enforcement of the ban on contraception (even through periodic retention) (Schoonheim 2005; Westhoff 1996). After the Second World War, efforts to raise young boys and girls to become "good Catholics" were intensified in the face of what the clergy thought was the detrimental influence of popular culture (music, movies, fashion, etc.). There was a strong emphasis on the virtue of having large families. This emphasis on large families was underpinned not only by the Catholic morality concerning sexuality, but also by the goal to become the majority population in the Netherlands. After centuries of marginalization and oppression, Catholics in the Netherlands had slowly regained their rights and visibility in the Netherlands since 1853, when the official church hierarchy was reinstalled. In 1953, more than a third of the Dutch were Catholic and the expectation was that they would within decades become the majority.

While men were expected to be the main breadwinners, women were educated to be good housewives and mothers. This was not out of step with Dutch norms generally: until the late fifties, women lost their job automatically upon marriage if they were in government service, and until 1954 they needed the official permission of their husband or father to enter into any formal contract. However, even after laws were passed taking away these limitations, the Dutch ideal of motherhood, and the Catholic ideal even more strongly, was to stay at home and take care of children and household.

A manual for housekeeping, widely used in Catholic girls' schools in Dutch Limburg, Belgium and France from the early twentieth century until the late 1950s, describes the characteristics of a good housewife as

follows: “courage, patience, gentleness and cheerfulness” (page 5). “A gentle woman in a well-maintained house will attract the man and will prevent him from finding rest and pleasure outside the home”. If she was not cheerful, misfortune would be the result: “dispute and misery will become masters of the family, unchaste habits are introduced more easily in this chaos and everything will be lost”. Therefore, women had to hide their worries and be content to be without adult company for most of the day, to be the angel in the home for their hardworking husbands. All this, it was taught, was but a cultivation of the natural inclinations of women.

Since the days this manual was used, new ideals of womanhood and personhood have entered local contexts (described beautifully already in 1978 by Brinkgreve and by Korzec in 1978). Progress, modernization, feminism, although at first received with suspicion, have radically altered the ideals the younger generations in this region live by since the early 1970s (Knibbe 2013a, chap. 4). To some extent, it was taken for granted that women should now have the same rights and opportunities as men, however, in terms of actual division of (emotional) labor, the south of the Netherlands, as the rest of the Netherlands, is strongly divided along gendered lines.

Within the Spiritual Group (hereafter called SG), this was worked on in various ways. This group was a meeting place for psychics, magnetists, mediums and ordinary people with an interest in the paranormal and spiritual. The SG also organized “open nights” when a medium of (mostly local) fame gave messages “from the other side”. Mediums and aura readers drew the big crowds. The people who came to these nights had often recently lost someone dear to them, or were in a personal crisis and hoped to receive guidance from the other side. Lectures (on pyramids, dream interpretation, etc.) were visited by a more dedicated group of people who were themselves developing as spiritual practitioners. Although the SG was very eclectic, the discourses and practices espoused there did have to conform to certain underlying assumptions; people who deviated from this were called back sharply (Knibbe 2013b). The general background of the people frequenting this group was Catholic, but like in other settings, calling oneself “spiritual” or interested in spirituality involved a basic understanding of institutionalized religion as too rigid, hierarchical and misogynistic. At the time of the research, many of the women were interested in the mysteries of Saint Mary Magdalene, elaborated in the next ethnographic example. They agreed that the Catholic Church kept these mysteries secret out of self-interest, to bolster male hierarchical powers.

Apart from these discussions on the Magdalene, gender and sexuality were not often an explicit topic during these meetings. Nevertheless, over the course of 1.5 years of fieldwork, it became clear that the advice to women and to men followed clearly gendered patterns. Men were usually encouraged to “open up their hearts”, whereas women were told to create more boundaries and set their own priorities. In the following, we will show how this advice is embedded within larger gendered understandings of personhood, spiritual development and work on the self.

One phrase in particular summarizes the advice to women to set their own priorities. It was often used in informal conversation between the regulars of the SG, but also on several occasions, by mediums transmitting messages or psychics. In Dutch, the phrase was *meeleven, niet meelijden*. This is hard to translate, since it plays on different levels of meaning. In a slightly different form (*medeleven, geen medelijden*), this phrase can be recognized as the way many professionals in spiritual care, health care and nursing are trained to manage their emotions and relate to patients: empathize (*medeleven*), but do not pity (*medelijden*). In this form, it addresses and critiques the patronizing attitude implicit in pitying someone.

The form used within the SG, however, is explicitly directed against a perceived tendency of women to take on other people’s problems as their own burden. Contextually, the advice translates as: empathize (*meeleven, literally “live along”*), but do not suffer along (*meelijden*) with other people. In this form, it encourages women not to close themselves off to other people’s problems and suffering, which would be a radical departure from earlier gendered ideals, but not to identify too closely with them either. It was assumed that many women do this, and thus deny themselves happiness: as long as they have not yet solved other people’s problems they cannot be happy.

For example, during one particular meeting, a female medium picked several women of similar age out of the audience and gave them advice in which the phrase *meeleven, niet meelijden* was embedded. Her advice was based on wax drawings we had made ourselves (made with crayons on paper, held above a candle and then folded to create symmetrical patterns). The medium commented:

This drawing shows something of a person who already passed to the other side. You are still very sad about it. You are also a person who is very busy caring for other people. You often provide a listening ear to people. But for you, the advice is very strongly: you are allowed to live along [empathize], but not to suffer along with other people (*je mag wel meeleven, maar niet meelijden*).

These were the suggestions for another group member:

I see a cross in your drawing. At the moment, you are carrying two crosses. You have a straight back, but you should let some of the burden drop from your shoulders ... And also for you, the advice is: living along [empathy] is ok, suffering along is not ("meeleven ok, meelijden niet")

In both cases, the women recognized the description, and accepted the advice as relevant to their own lives.

These comments implied a certain problematization of the ways women relate to other people that can only be understood against the cultural and historical background of the gendered ideals of personhood they were brought up with. The women she addressed grew up at a time when women were taught to be selfless in their devotion to husband, children and family in general, and to carry out their caring tasks with cheerful disregard for their own worries.

The Netherlands was a strongly "pillarized" society, segregating Protestants, socialists, Catholics and liberals into parallel societies that were densely organized. As described above, the south of Limburg was mainly Catholic and other options in terms of schooling, leisure and health assistance were scarcely available, especially in the rural areas. These pillars seemed to "suddenly" crumble in the late sixties. Although, looking back, we see that the period from when these pillars were instituted until their demise only spans about 40 years (from 1917 when all schools, religious and public, were granted equal government funding after a long struggle, until roughly 1970) whole generations grew up within the Catholic pillar in the south of Limburg.

The post-WWII generation we are concerned with here grew up within the Catholic pillar, but also lived through its demise. The values that had been inculcated in them during their childhood, youth and young womanhood lost their legitimacy and were no longer taken for granted. And although the gender revolution is particularly "stalled" in the Netherlands,⁴ the necessity "to become an individual", "to be one's own person" is increasingly felt among women. Many of the older women who came to these meetings had never had the chance to make the choices that are now available to women (e.g. to follow higher education or even study at university, to have a career, to have an income), while the younger women were hindered by the continued expectations they themselves and their social surroundings had that they would take up the bulk of the caring work.

Caring work, and the “emotional labor” (Hochschild 2003) associated with it, has been the main job of women until now, in the south of Limburg, and even more so in the suburban/rural parts where Knibbe’s fieldwork took place. The phrase *meeleven, niet meelijden* embedded in the advice to women referred directly to this caring and emotional work and the stress this resulted in.

In other publications, Knibbe has shown how in these and other (similar) contexts a model of individuality and agency is held up to women that at first seems to confirm the stereotype of contemporary spirituality that it is all about a (narcissistic) celebration of the self (Knibbe 2013b). However, when we take into account the habitus of these women as it was formed during a time in which Catholicism had a particularly strong influence in the south of the Netherlands, a very different understanding of these discourses emerges. This understanding ties in more closely with the argument of Sointu and Woodhead (2008) that contemporary spirituality enables women to combine and negotiate different gendered ideals (we return to this theme after the discussion of sacred prostitution).

The *meeleven, niet meelijden* discourse can sometimes also take on a problematic turn, as happened during a session with a male medium (the following is a description of a meeting also described in Knibbe 2013b, 185). During the gathering in question, the medium asked several people to come forward and sit on a chair to be treated. The audience was told to hold hands and imagine light coming down. At some point, the medium turned to a woman of about 65. First he told her that she was a very good person, always doing everything she could for other people. “But you don’t get the gratitude you think you deserve. And that is painful for you”. At this, the woman addressed by the medium seemed close to bursting into tears and just nodded her head. He told her that the only way to deal with this was to learn how to give without expecting anything in return. She protested indignantly that she did not expect anything in return. The medium tried again, saying that she obviously did, because she felt hurt by the ingratitude of people, but she refused to accept this interpretation of her feelings, and she returned to her friends in the audience feeling offended. The medium had earlier explained his philosophy of self-love, making a bad example of his wife: you have to love yourself first, he declared. Every evening, you have to put your hand on the chakra for self-love (the second chakra, in the lower belly) and press, to get the energy going. Then you can let go of all worries. He does this every night and goes right to sleep, while his wife lies awake worrying about people.

Paradoxically, a woman who clearly lived for other people according to the ideal of womanhood outlined above was criticized for being selfish, and told to give without expecting anything in return. Generally, women were often portrayed as overcaring, suffocating their children and loved ones by worrying too much about them and taking on their problems. Although the ideals of personhood developed within this context worked on older, more constraining symbols of Woman (in Sered's terms) (Sered 2001), in this case the new ideals of personhood became a tool to uphold gendered hierarchies where a male medium exemplified the right kind of personhood in contrast to his wife and the woman he attempted to treat. A supposedly gender-neutral, universal "Unselfish Love" was contrasted to the gendered "Angel in the Home" type of love, recast as a selfish, even narcissist type of love that needed the gratitude of other people to feel validated.

Within contemporary spirituality, there are several trends that emphasize "unconditional love" as one of the highest values and associate it with the highest form of energy. Although this "unconditional love" is not explicitly tied to gender ideologies, the question is in which ways this ideal is tied to the implicit and explicit gendering going on in the context of contemporary spirituality. The next ethnographic vignette based on Fedele's fieldwork will show how this is elaborated with regard to sexuality.

NEO-TANTRA AND SACRED PROSTITUTION

In her fieldwork among Italian, Spanish, British, and American pilgrims influenced by the international Pagan movement visiting Catholic shrines related to Mary Magdalene in France (2013), Anna Fedele found that most of these spiritual travelers were consciously trying to break free from their Catholic background. Traveling with friends or in organized groups, the pilgrims were mainly women. They created rituals to connect with the "energy of Mary Magdalene", to commune with the "Divine Feminine" and to celebrate the sacrality of their bodies.

According to these pilgrims, Mary Magdalene had been wrongly labeled as a sinner by the (Christian) "Church", transforming the female equivalent of Jesus into a repentant prostitute (Fedele 2013, 7–10). Visiting the French shrines where according to a Christian legend Magdalene had lived after the crucifixion, the pilgrims described experiences of healing physical and psychological wounds related to sexuality (abuse, surgery on reproductive organs, etc.). Many of them also explained how they man-

aged to overcome the negative stereotypes about body and sexuality they had received from their Christian (mostly Catholic) upbringing. After centuries as the patron saint of prostitutes, at the end of the twentieth century, Mary Magdalene became a model for sacred love and sexuality as described in popular novels, such as Clysta Kinstler's *The Moon Under Her Feet* (Kinstler 1989).⁵

Mary Magdalene pilgrims believed that ancient "sacred prostitutes" were women who knew techniques related to "sacred sexuality". These prostitutes, they believed, were priestesses of the Goddess who enabled men to experience communion with the divine. Pilgrims were assiduous readers and critically approached the theories they read or heard from pilgrimage leaders. Even if many pilgrims described Mary Magdalene as a sacred lover or as the archetype of the lover she was only sometimes referred to as a sacred prostitute.⁶

For reasons of brevity, in this chapter we will focus only on the case of Spanish Mary Magdalene pilgrims and on their attempt to overcome the Christian stigmatization of body and sexuality embracing a heterogeneous corpus of theories about sacred sexuality and sacred prostitution usually described with the umbrella term of "Tantra" or "Tantric tradition". This corpus allowed the pilgrims to see sexuality as a possible way for spiritual elevation and to reinforce their conceptualization of the body as the manifestation of divine forces.

As Hugh Urban has shown in his study of the metamorphoses of Tantra through the centuries, Tantra is very difficult to define. Academics usually describe Tantra as "a specific brand of religious practice common to the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions since at least the seventh century". It is seen as a "particularly radical and dangerous practice that involves activities normally prohibited" in the societies where they take place; such as having sexual intercourse with lower-class partners or consuming meat and wine (Urban 2003, 1). To avoid confusion, we will refer to the theories and practices of Mary Magdalene pilgrims as "Neo-tantra".

Neo-tantra reinterprets traditional tantric techniques, presenting them as a way of enhancing sexual pleasure and of overcoming "patriarchal" ideas of shame and guilt related to sexuality. Neo-tantra harnesses the "sexual energy" derived from the union with the partner for spiritual elevation and personal empowerment. Mixing theories and practices deriving from Neo-tantra and the so-called "Tao of Sexuality" popularized by Mantak Chia (Chia 1983; Chia et al. 2009), sacred sexuality manuals like those by Margot Anand (Anand 1998) reveal how to harmonize one's

“inner man” and “inner woman”, honor the body and allow sexual energy to rise. Both men and women learn to store the sexual energy inside their bodies and then to use it for the enhancement of pleasure and vitality and, above all, for spiritual elevation.

Encarnación's story⁷ offers a good example of a Catholic woman's path from considering sex sinful to developing the notion of sacred sexuality. This Andalusian woman in her early fifties had traveled to the places associated to Magdalene in Southern France twice with friends and described the influence of Magdalene on her self-image as a woman and as a sexual being. From the moment she began to menstruate, Encarna had received a clear message from her father that she was both in danger from, and dangerous to, others. She could now become pregnant, potentially compromising her own and her family's honor. In the small village in Andalusia where she was born, she was punished merely for being seen spending too much time with a boy. When Encarna moved to Barcelona with her sister, her father was afraid that she might “run wild” and sleep with men before marriage.

One day her family caught her alone with her boyfriend Alberto in a room in her house in Barcelona. The whole family became upset and Encarna felt terrible, even though she had never had sex with Alberto and he was her accepted boyfriend whom she was supposed to marry. Both her father and Alberto were furious. In a world she experienced as dominated by men, Encarna felt helpless and saw her sexuality as a dangerous source of trouble. Some days later, Alberto decided that they would marry so that nobody could bother them any longer. Encarna was taken aback but passively accepted his decision. After their marriage Encarna and Alberto had two daughters.

Even after marriage Encarna was afraid to open up and allow herself to feel pleasure; when she did, it was always combined with great fear. Shortly before her divorce, by which time her husband had had another secret daughter with his lover, Encarna went on holiday to the Caribbean. There she had a passionate love affair with a local man and for the first time in years allowed herself to enjoy sex. Encarna also attended a workshop on Neo-tantra, but did not like it. She felt sexually blocked and saw this as a result of her education and the wider culture. One day she heard about Mary Magdalene and sacred sexuality and she felt immediately attracted. She thought: “Aah! Sexuality can be sacred! And if it can be sacred, I can”. Encarna explained further: “If the sexual act is not sinful then I do not feel dirty”. Mary Magdalene's case showed Encarna that there were

possibilities of having sex without feeling guilty and she therefore decided to discover more about her and go on a pilgrimage to the French shrines dedicated to the saint.

After her first visit to Southern France, Encarna felt a strong connection with Magdalene. She reported that the way she perceived her own body and sexuality had changed and that she could allow herself to discover the sexuality she had blocked all her life. Encouraged by these experiences, Encarna had a short relationship with a married cousin. They had fallen in love in their teens, but feeling their family's criticism Encarna had decided to end their relationship and had married Alberto some years later. Encarna felt that something needed to be resolved so that both of them could go on with their lives without being haunted by their attraction. Encarna believed that their lifelong attraction was a factor that had prevented both of them from being happy in their marriages.

Hence after 30 years, she allowed herself to experience a relationship that according to the values of her family and the "Church" was doubly forbidden, first, because her lover was a cousin and second, because he was married. She described this experience as an apprenticeship in "opening the heart", living out the relationship on its own terms, knowing that her cousin would not abandon his wife and that she herself did not wish him to.

As a woman, Encarna explained, you could relate to a man "as a mother or as a woman". Through experiences she associated with Magdalene, Encarna felt that she could now be with men as a woman and lover and no longer as a mother. The conviction that women act like mothers, rather than lovers for their partners kept popping up during my fieldwork and was embedded in a more complex belief structure that shows many parallelisms with the gender ideologies of the women in the South of the Netherlands in Knibbe's ethnographic example. According to this mother-lover dichotomy, especially women socialized in a Catholic milieu tended to give a kind of motherly, ever forgiving and ever nurturing love to their partners, thereby sacrificing themselves. Although this kind of motherly love was not explicitly described as "suffocating" as in Knibbe's case, it was certainly perceived as potentially harmful for both partners and for their relationship. This kind of motherly love was also related to the woman's desire (often associated with Catholic restrictions on sexuality) to bind the partner and have a stable relationship. But, according to Neo-tantric theories, men wanted lovers, not mothers and they might eventually have enough of their partner's motherly attitudes and look elsewhere for a lover.

Women like Encarna perceived sexuality in Neo-tantric terms as a way to elevation and communion with the divine and also spoke of “sacred lovers”. These were lovers who offered their sexuality with unconditional love, without trying to manipulate their partners into stable relationships or to obtain anything in return. In this new dichotomy of mother-lover, motherly love toward a partner was not perceived as unconditional (like the love of a mother for her child is commonly described in Western culture) but as conditional and controlling. Implicit in these assumptions is that sacred sexuality is only possible if love is involved and that this love should pose no conditions, which means in this context that the woman who engages in the sexual relationship should not expect that this will lead to the creation of a stable relationship.

Despite celebrating sexual connection based on the principle of “unconditional love” rather than stability or long-term commitment, the pilgrims I talked to had, or longed for, a stable relationship. Most of the women had never been, or no longer were, married. Some had partners, others did not. Like women during the sexual revolution, these pilgrims reclaimed the right to have sex outside marriage or stable relationships. Unlike their counterparts in the sixties, they did not say that these encounters might take place just for fun or pleasure, but rather described them as potentially sacred experiences. However, “sacred sex” could also take place within a stable relationship provided that both partners perceived sexuality as a path toward spiritual development and tried to cultivate unconditional love, granting personal freedom and respect to each other.

After ending her relationship with her cousin, Encarna moved out of her ex-husband’s house in Barcelona, a decision she felt she had been putting off for too much time because it implied living apart from her younger daughter (in her twenties). Encarna felt that only after this change she was able to envisage having a stable relationship with another man. When some time later she started a relationship with a man her own age, Encarna soon found that she did not feel comfortable. She felt that her new partner, like her husband, was molded according to the classic “macho model” and that he wanted to establish a similar kind of partnership dynamic. Encarna tried to introduce him to a more spiritual approach, explaining that partnership did not mean constant control and that sexuality did not only and necessarily mean penetration or domination of the woman. Her partner however reacted in a defensive way. Encarna concluded that after her experience during the pilgrimages and all the healing work she

had done to trust her body again, she could not face having another relationship like that and put an end to it.⁸

As we can see from Encarna's life narrative and the way in which she feels that the encounters with Mary Magdalene affected her conceptualization of sexuality, there is a strong link between lived spirituality and gendered empowerment. Embracing a spiritual conceptualization of body and sexuality, Encarna managed to reinterpret the failure of her marriage to attain more independency and also to refuse establishing a new relationship based on what she described as a macho model.

Tracing the theories related to sacred sexuality, it seems that body and sexuality are viewed according to a familiar dichotomy: either sinful or sacred. We might ask whether there is room for sex simply for pleasure? As in a game of mirrors, the Catholic concept of sexuality as sinful is transformed into sacred sexuality. In both interpretations, there is an expectation that sex should be meaningful and related to love, it should not be practiced just for its own sake. The idea that the sexual act needs to have a meaning that goes beyond the act itself is deeply embedded in Christian traditions and particularly in Catholicism.

Clearly expressed in the papal bill *Humanae Vitae* (Paul VI 1968) the idea that sex should be practiced only after marriage, without hindering the possibility of reproduction, is still at the center of contemporary debates about the Catholic's church positioning toward contraception. Only under these conditions is it allowed. Generally, people who turn toward spirituality feel that the Catholic teachings on sexuality are focused too much on what is not allowed and place the burden on women to ensure that sexual urges do not overstep the bounds of propriety, as was clearly the case for Encarna's marriage. Turning this concept upside down, theories about sexuality as a sacred path to spiritual evolution offer a different view and as Encarna observed: "[I]f it can be sacred, I can".

However, sacred sexuality inevitably carries with it new expectations and constraints. Sex now needs to be sacred; the purpose now is no longer reproduction and the consecration of womanhood through motherhood but spiritual evolution. If sex is not experienced as sacred, is it then "profane" or "impure"? Women and men may feel pressure to achieve a spiritually fulfilling orgasm and feel inadequate when they do not achieve this goal. By inverting the meaning ascribed to sexuality in the attempt to overcome the dualism between sinful sex outside marriage and legitimate sex, a new dualism emerges. Adapting Sered's analysis of the "Good Woman" and the "Bad Woman" (2001, 157), we suggest that this new

dualism opposes “Good Sex” to “Bad Sex”. If “Good Sex” is related to unconditional love, spiritual elevation and healing, this implicitly creates a fallback position, “Bad Sex”, related to conditional motherly and controlling love or to the absence of love, a profane dimension with potentially harmful consequences.

PROBLEMATIZING GENDERED EMPOWERMENT WITHIN CONTEMPORARY SPIRITUALITY

Focusing mainly on data emerging from the United Kingdom, Woodhead and Sointu argue that spirituality is more attractive to women because it validates traditionally feminine values of caring, but also helps them manage the double (or triple) burden of contemporary femininity in the public and private sphere. In their analysis, contemporary spirituality helps middle-class women to move from selfless caring in their family life, and often also in their caring professions, to expressive selfhood. They argue that contemporary spirituality with its focus on taking care of the self “can have profound moral consequences for individuals located in social roles that deny the legitimacy of self-fulfillment” (Sointu and Woodhead 2008, 272–273).

Similarly, the work done in the contexts described in this chapter shows how women engage in spiritual practices and how spiritual leaders engage women to resolve tensions borne out of a traditional Catholic upbringing with modern notions of personhood. In both cases, the central issues that women are encouraged to work on concern the way they relate to other people. In both cases, they are encouraged to become more empowered, to choose for themselves. Where we depart from the analysis of Sointu and Woodhead is that we also showed how in both cases women are confronted with norms and expectations that sometimes seem to be unexpected metamorphoses of the norms and expectations they are encouraged to leave behind. In both cases, the self-reform women are supposed to strive for is developed against the background of a Catholic upbringing, and as a solution to the problems and oppression generated through this Catholic context. Yet, gendered hierarchies are recreated as well. In this case, this is shown through a focus on the ways the ideal of unconditional love is reworked within spiritual circles.

Feminist scholars in the social sciences have shown how dualisms such as woman—man, nature—culture, irrational—rational, body—soul, impure—pure, sinful—sacred, are problematic because they tend to be nat-

uralized and therefore considered as immutable (e.g. Ortner 1972; Martin 1987; Fausto-Sterling 2000). There is a hierarchy implicit in these oppositions that has been used to justify different kinds of inequality. Feminist scholars criticize mainstream culture for seeing white, heterosexual man as the pure incarnation of rationality and (Western) culture and opposed to women, homosexuals, and so on. Spiritual authors who often draw on popularized versions of social sciences literature (Fedele 2013) and spiritual practitioners who often have university degrees, seem to be aware of the existence of these dualisms and reinterpret them, tending to emphasize, or even sacralize, the part that has been downplayed in mainstream culture.⁹ For instance, the characterization that women are less rational than men is recast as an asset, because it allows them to be more open to intuition and to spirituality. They are closer to nature and to the sacred; elements that have been interpreted as negative and dangerous by Christianity but are now recognized as positive and empowering by contemporary spirituality. This leaves unchallenged the dualisms themselves and, as we have seen, may end up producing new dualisms and consequent hierarchies. This process of criticism and reproduction within contemporary spirituality can be compared to similar processes in secular contexts (e.g. Fraser 2009).

Similarly, although the women receiving advice by the mediums in Knibbe's fieldwork were often encouraged to establish firmer boundaries, not live for other people but for themselves, they were also told that unconditional love is the ultimate goal. This included giving without expecting anything in return. The idea is that one should first love oneself; develop spiritually and personally, so that one can give selflessly, without being dependent on other people's appreciation. The life choices of those women who were taught that they could find their fulfillment as housewives, caring for others, were thus invalidated, not only in the wider society but also through these personal messages said to come directly "from the other side". Discursively, the stereotypical "sacrificing woman" was held up as selfish and highly problematic, creating a dilemma for those women who had shaped their lives according to this ideal.

We are not suggesting that the social actors are entirely unaware of these problems. In fact, especially in the USA there have been debates for instance within the Pagan communities about gender stereotypes and heterosexual assumptions (see Pike 2001 on the debate related to homosexuality). Spiritual practitioners adapt these ideas to their own needs and situations. If a growing number of sex workers in the USA now describe themselves as sacred prostitutes (Gilmore 1998), others, like Encarna, find

personal solutions for their own specific cases. When Fedele recently talked to her, she had been in a stable relationship with a man of approximately her age for some years. Even if she found that this man sometimes had macho attitudes she also realized that he was less controlling and much more open to change, accepting for instance that Encarna wanted to continue living on her own. He might not be the perfect spiritual partner but he respected Encarna and her choices.

As became clear through the ethnographic examples, contemporary spirituality in Catholic contexts derives its force and salience from this contrasting background (Fedele 2013; Knibbe 2012; Knibbe 2013a). However, this does not mean that we wish to go along with the representation of traditional religion as necessarily disempowering. As many authors have shown, traditional religion also provides sites of agency and empowerment for women (e.g. Gemzoë 2005; Hermkens et al. 2009). Furthermore, a more complex understanding of agency and subjectivity can help us place the resistance of the woman who was reprimanded for being selfish in her love for other people (c.f. Mahmood 2008; Braidotti 2008). Agency does not always imply resistance, submission can be a form of agency, as Mahmood argues. Although she adhered to traditional Catholic gender roles rejected by contemporary spirituality, she was empowered enough to reject the degrading description of the medium.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have highlighted how in two very different contexts, reworking the meaning of love and care is implicitly and explicitly part of the practice of contemporary spirituality. In this sense, we can go along with the suggestion of Sointu and Woodhead that contemporary spiritualities address the triple burden of women and revalue their work. Important work is being done in these contexts to transform cultural values and rethink gendered personhood. However, we think it is important to not only go along with the more celebratory accounts of contemporary spirituality as empowering for women. In the cases we described here, love and the accompanying “emotional work” remains the province of women. Thus, love and femininity remain intricately bound up with each other also in contemporary spirituality, confirming an essentialist gendering that is not so different from mainstream gender ideologies. Simply inverting gender ideologies, placing “feminine” virtues above “male” vir-

tues does not necessarily lead to a critical reworking of gendered hierarchies and moreover leaves the burden of emotional labor squarely on women's shoulders. Furthermore, attempts to "reform" women to take on less emotional labor can have the effect of devaluing their life choices and putting masculine role models more firmly in place.

This process of contesting but also reproducing essentializing gendered dualisms and hierarchies is of course not exclusive to contemporary spirituality. Nevertheless, it is particularly interesting to analyze this process in the context of contemporary spirituality because spiritual practitioners explicitly criticize and try to overcome classical dichotomies (Brown 1997, 48; Fedele 2013; Knibbe 2013b). Insights into the problems and contradictions they are confronted with in their quest for empowering ways to experience gender and sexuality can therefore provide an interesting lens to study similar processes of gender struggles in religious as well as in secular contexts. Our analysis suggests that the division of labor in emotional work is key to critically address gendered hierarchies, paralleling the insight that the division of labor in care work is crucial to a feminism that relates critically to exploitative societal arrangements generally.

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NOTES

1. These designations are often problematized by the people referred to, whereas the term "spiritual" and "spirituality" is used as a connective term among many of the discourses and practices scholars identify with New Age, Neopaganism and some New Religious Movements.
2. Janet L. Jacobs, "Abuse in New Religious Movements: Challenges for the Sociology of Religion", in *Teaching New Religious Movements*, ed. David G. Bromley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); see also Jacobs, "Gender and Power in New Religious Movements",

- Religion* 21, no. 4 (1991): 345–356, Rachel Werczberger, “Spirituality, Charisma and Gender in a Jewish Spiritual Renewal Community in Israel”, in *Gender and Power in Contemporary Spirituality. Ethnographic Approaches*, eds. Anna Fedele and Kim E. Knibbe (London and New York: Routledge, 2013, forthcoming)
3. Anna Fedele “From Christian Religion to Feminist Spirituality. Mary Magdalene Pilgrimages to La Sainte-Baume, France”, *Culture and Religion* 10, no. 3 (2009): 243–261.
 4. Women earn less than men, and usually work part time. Furthermore, unpaid caring work is mostly done by women.
 5. For a detailed analysis of the different meanings ascribed to Saint Mary Magdalene during the centuries, see among others: (Haskins 1995; Maisch 1998). For an analysis of contemporary theories about Mary Magdalene and the way in which they relate to previous interpretations see Fedele 2008.
 6. The text (translated to Spanish) some of the pilgrims referred to was Nancy Qualls-Corbett, *The Sacred Prostitute: Eternal Aspect of the Feminine* (Qualls-Corbett 1988).
 7. Encarnación’s life story also appears in Fedele 2013, 32–34, 202–203, 260.
 8. For more examples of changes Spanish pilgrims experienced after the pilgrimage in their sexual lives, see Chap. 8 in Fedele 2013.
 9. Sometimes, spiritual practitioners also try to overcome dualisms, such as that of body and soul, referring to an energy discourse (Fedele and Llera Blanes 2011).

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