



Astro TV in Holland: Spirituality, Power and Gender

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Generally speaking, it is easier for a woman to feel and be in her body, so she is naturally closer to Being and potentially closer to enlightenment than a man.

(Eckhart Tolle)¹

Abstract

In the Netherlands a two-hour spiritual television show called Astro TV is broadcast daily on a commercial channel. I analyse the power and gender relations in and underlying this programme on the basis of my anthropological observations with reference to the theories of Bourdieu, Wood, Woodhead and others. In the show clients can call in and have a short consultation with a “spiritual specialist”, usually a psychic. On the surface such shows are very much like the presentations that psychics held at paranormal fairs in the 1990s. Both in the television show and in real consultations the psychics do dominate somewhat because of their claim to channel special signs or messages from “beyond” – they act like magicians. However, clients can reject the message or debate its meaning. Backstage a large and obscure pool of psychics, alternative healers and counsellors, publishers and businesspeople use divination programmes and other mass media presentations to supply a large public with holistic spirituality. On this second level real power is exerted more or less anonymously and commercially. Nevertheless, the divination practice appears to offer psychological support to the mainly working-class women who participate in it. Besides, both clients and psychics enjoy such practices, for instance as entertainment. Although religious symbolism is frequently used in such divinations, they should not be seen as a form of religion (because they lack worship), but as secular spirituality.

Keywords: divination, spirituality, power, gender, psychics, television, internet

Słowa kluczowe: wróżbiarstwo, duchowość, moc, płęć, psychika, telewizja, Internet

At first glance, the Dutch programme “Astro TV” seems to be a commercial and usually not particularly exciting daily television show. Its catchword is “spirituality”. In

¹ E. Tolle, *The Power of NOW: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*, London 2005, p. 136–137.

this respect it appears to be part of a large network of television programmes, internet websites, magazines, shops, alternative therapies and training, all propagating spirituality as a kind of healing and a worldview. What at first sight seems to be a quite innocuous divinatory play where the customer is always right in fact may be part of an international system of holistic healers, psychics, wellness centres and companies, all making a profit by selling popular spirituality in Western society. About two thirds of the people that actually participate, both as providers and clients, are women. In the event, are they in charge?

I would like to address this question about power and gender in popular spiritualities by means of a case study of Astro TV. When looking for adequate theories on power and gender, I noticed that some scholars, in their thorough analysis of new spiritualities, use a grand explanation of (post-)modern culture as their point of departure. For instance, Paul Heelas, Gordon Lynch, and Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman explain why such “spiritualities of Life” (Heelas) or “progressive spirituality” (Lynch) could arise, but not who are behind them². They consider these spiritualities to be a kind of self-expressive religiosity which late modern (or postmodern) individuals use to oppose liberal society or authoritarian Christianity. Christopher Partridge offers a similar hypothesis, again without any indication of its initiators. He suggests that such spiritualities are part of a “re-enchantment of the West”, which is a postmodern reaction to rationalisation in modernity. The countercultural milieu of the 1960s has grown into a mainstream popular religion by means of esoteric ideas and cultic practices³. Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, by contrast, apply a massive Marxist analysis. They assert that popular spiritual practices are a new collusion of the religion of capitalism to subject both women and men to consumerism and labour discipline with the help of feel-good spirituality⁴. However, Matthew Wood, with the help of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory, concludes that such spiritualities are only practised in a “non-formative” border zone of religion where ambitious members of the working class exert their “relativised multiple authorities” without developing a religious *habitus*⁵.

Furthermore, most theories on the relation between spirituality and gender stem from feminist theology, which is fairly normative and therefore less useful⁶. Houtman and Aupers’s sociological approach of detraditionalisation and gender in spirituality

² P. Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life: New Age Romanticism and Consumptive Capitalism*, Oxford 2008; G. Lynch, *The New Spirituality: An Introduction to Progressive Belief in the Twenty-first Century*, London 2007; S. Aupers, D. Houtman, *Beyond the Spiritual Supermarket: The Social and Public Significance of New Age Spirituality*, “Journal of Contemporary Religion” 2006, No. 21, p. 201–222.

³ Ch. Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture*, London 2004.

⁴ J. Carrette, R. King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion*, London 2005.

⁵ M. Wood, *Possession, Power and the New Age: Ambiguities of Authority in Neoliberal Societies*, Aldershot 2007, p. 71.

⁶ L. Mikaelsson, *Gendering the History of Religions* [in:] *New Approaches to the Study of Religion*, vol. 1: *Regional, Critical, and Historical Approaches*, P. Antes et al. (ed.), Berlin–New York 2004, p. 295–316.

is not specific enough⁷. For my purpose the most interesting studies are various articles by Linda Woodhead and Eeva Sointu. They argue that it is mainly middle-class women who make use of holistic body-mind practices to gain self-esteem and a space of their own⁸. I will return to their theory and those of Wood and Bourdieu, but for now it is important to note that they draw attention to issues such as popularity (which people or groups participate, in what way, by which means or media), enchantment (wonder, the sacred), commercialism, identity formation, regions of religion, class membership, authority, corporeality, and femininity.

From 2005 to 2006 I did fieldwork at Dutch paranormal fairs⁹. Such fairs lend themselves to participant observation. I had contact with providers of all kinds of spiritual goods and met clients as well. Later on, I discovered that some of the psychics at my fairs made appearances on television and became celebrities in that sector. I decided to broaden my research to television shows, because in a sense their providers and audience in general seemed to be similar to those of the fairs. This decision complicated the methodology, because the anthropology of mass media and religion adds a further level of research. Birgit Meyer posits that in religion a mass medium (e.g. television) often establishes immediate contact with the transcendent, so that “mediation itself is sacralised” with the help of a new “semiotic ideology”¹⁰. The effect is paradoxical: although a new medium transforms a religion or its message, it remains more or less invisible or “hyper-apparent”¹¹. Nevertheless in my case, front stage Astro TV retains the relatively simple structure of the filmed mini-consultation, with a psychic on screen and a client (speaking on the telephone) that can be heard. Thus I can still analyse the conversations, observe the provider and listen to the client, and do so carefully, because I have the shooting at my disposal¹². However, information about the backstage situation is harder to get, although I maintained contact with several psychics.

In this article I start with a short ethnography of Astro TV in Holland by presenting the television show, its context and the autobiographies of some of the psychics (1). Next I go into Bourdieu and Wood’s theory of power in religion, and that of gender, following Woodhead (2). These ideas allow me to venture an analysis of power (3) and gender (4) in Astro TV, and at the same time to engage in a discussion with the aforementioned authors.

⁷ D. Houtman, S. Aupers, *The Spiritual Revolution and the New Age Gender Puzzle: the Sacralization of the Self in Late Modernity* [in:] *Women and Religion in the West*, K. Aune et al. (ed.), Aldershot 2008, p. 99–118.

⁸ E. Sointu, L. Woodhead, *Spirituality, Gender and Expressive Selfhood*, “Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion” 2008, No. 47, p. 259–276.

⁹ F. Jespers, *The Paranormal Market in the Netherlands: New Age and Folk Religion*, “Fieldwork in Religion” 2010, No. 5, p. 58–77.

¹⁰ B. Meyer, *Mediation and immediacy: sensational forms, semiotic ideologies and the question of the medium*, “Social Anthropology” 2011, No. 19, p. 23–39 (32 and 30).

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 25 and 34.

¹² M.A. Peterson, *Anthropology and Mass Communication: Media and Myth in the New Millennium*, New York–Oxford 2003.

1. Astro TV: the show, its context, autobiographies of psychics

My ethnography of Astro TV in Holland consists of three parts: first a description of the daily television show, next an outline of its context, and finally some autobiographical details of the (psychic) anchor people of the show. In such autobiographies I expect to come across their attitude towards identity, authority, the sacred and other issues that I raised to shed light on my power and gender questions.

Every day between 11am and 1 pm, including weekends, the programme Astro TV is broadcast on the Dutch commercial channel Net 5. It is an interactive show using the telephone as a method: the viewer dials the station and gets a short free consultation, visible on screen to everyone, with the psychic appearing live. The show is presented as a service of the firm Astro TV, which offers a range of (what they call) “spiritual specialists” for extensive private consultations. On television one gets pithy examples of the treatments on offer and the available tools, such as tarot or angel cards and the horoscope. On its website Astro TV calls its programme “infotainment”¹³. Much of the show serves to promote the specialists, who can be contacted by telephone or internet. The phrase “home shopping” is also always projected in the background.

The anchor person is an attractive young woman, either a psychic herself or hosting an astrologer or psychic, sometimes a man. In front of them they have a table with tools, paper and pen. The background looks like a (consulting) room, often displaying images of Buddha or astrological symbols. Every eight minutes or so, a client is introduced. The client explains her or his problem, then the psychic spends two minutes on a mini-consultation. Usually the psychic asks for details, such as the client’s age or birth date. Next, the psychic uses her capacities or tools to obtain a message from “beyond” about the problem. This message is conveyed by the psychic, generally as a sign. Most of the signs are bodily ones (“While you’re telling me your problem, my throat’s hurting. Do you feel this as well?”), which are usually interpreted as psychological states (“You are anxious”). Other signs refer to energy, social relations and nature or the cosmos. The psychic and client deliberate briefly to interpret the sign. The psychic then makes a diagnosis and offers advice to resolve the problem. All in all the programme is one long appeal to consult a “certified” astrologer or clairvoyant. Clients’ problems mainly concern health, bereavement, love affairs, jobs or money. An analysis of their conversations on such subjects gives the impression that the majority of clients belongs to the working class. A rough count of a number of Astro shows yields a statistic of 75 percent women¹⁴.

Astro TV’s website is quite instructive. “Astro tv is the largest, most famous and respected group of spiritual specialists in the Netherlands and Belgium”¹⁵. The visitor seeking spiritual help can find a lot of information about the diviners, their speciali-

¹³ www.astrotv.nl [accessed: 1–15.06.2010].

¹⁴ F. Jespers, *Holistische spiritualiteit achter Astro TV en Chinese geneeswijzen* [in:] *Nieuwe religiositeit in Nederland: Gevalstudies en beschouwingen over alternatieve religieuze activiteiten*, F. Jespers (ed.), Budel 2009, p. 185–212 (187–189, 203). Cf. *Idem*, *Paranormal Market*, p. 67.

¹⁵ www.astrotv.nl [accessed: 1–15.06. 2010]; transl. F.J.

ties and ways to get in touch with them. There is also some “spiritual news” and an *AstroShop* for internet shopping¹⁶. The latter offers a large assortment of tarot and angel cards, candles, incense, oils, music, crystals, books (e.g. Eckhart Tolle’s best seller, *The Power of NOW*), and images of the Buddha, gods or angels. No definition of spirituality appears on the site, although this is a key concept. Actually it remains ambivalent: it refers both to the person’s psychological equilibrium and to a higher world (“the other side”, or “beyond”) of spirits of the deceased, angels or a universal consciousness. This impression is corroborated on the “information” page by an explanation of twelve spiritual specialities which are on offer: astrology, numerology, spiritual healing, intuitive counselling, spiritual coaching, dream interpretation, Eastern or religious wisdom, mental mediumship, trance mediumship, psychic mediumship, “paragnosticism” (clairvoyance), and tarot fortune telling. The website claims that the general aim is to help clients to regain their psychological equilibrium or to grow stronger by accessing signs or energies from “the world beyond”. Next, 31 psychics working for Astro TV present themselves on their “personal pages” (*persoonlijkepaginas*). I scrutinise some of these autobiographies below. Throughout the site a warning appears: “This [psychic] treatment is no substitute for a medical consultation; please visit a GP or specialist in case of physical complaints.”

This kind of psychic service was offered locally in the West in the past, but seems to have disappeared around 1970¹⁷. After 1980 it resurfaced, along with alternative medicine. At first, from about 1990, psychics featured in regional New Age fairs. They successfully appropriated the main New Age symbolism (chakras, karma, indigenous amulets, etc.). After about 2000 this combination proved so popular that the New Age emblem could be abandoned¹⁸. Spirituality was the new catchword for alternative (psychic and medical) services.

In 2004 a Dutch businessman launched short Astro TV shows. Since 2007 the international *Scandinavian Broadcasting System* (SBS) has been offering the programme every day on Net 5. The same formula is used in Germany and many other European countries, not only by SBS but by rival firms as well. In September 2008 there was an outcry in the Netherlands about such television programmes, because they made a profit from the money people paid to dial in, by deliberately keeping most of them waiting in vain. A report on this financial abuse was even presented in parliament. However, there was no debate on the principle of psychic (or astrological) services; these are generally accepted. Astro TV confined itself to adapting the telephone access system, and still continues the daily show, with an average of 3000 viewers in summer and many more in winter¹⁹.

I mentioned above that Astro TV forms just a small part of a large system of spiritual services. It is not the television show, but the telephone, internet and personal

¹⁶ *AstroShop* became independent shortly after July 2010.

¹⁷ F. Jespers, *Holistische spiritualiteit...*, p. 189–190.

¹⁸ S. Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age: a History of Spiritual Practices*, London 2003, p. 174–194, 214; F. Jespers, *Paranormal Market...*, p. 64–65.

¹⁹ F. Jespers, *Holistische spiritualiteit...*, p. 190–191; www.kijkonderzoek.nl [accessed: 1–15.06.2010].

consultations that are the core business. Although Astro TV is a large international company, it has hundreds of competitors on a national and especially a local level. These operate via local shops, centres, courses, etc. They get support, however, from broadcasting channels, book and magazine publishers, film and computer game producers and training schools. Since 2007 holistic firms have produced a pool of famous psychics via an annual television contest, *In Search of the Sixth Sense*. In the Netherlands alone there are about 80 (part-time) schools for astrologers and psychics, with a similar number for alternative health services. One way or another they all espouse and propagate the worldview that I call holistic spirituality.

When I scrutinise the self-presentation of some “spiritual specialists” on Astro TV I perceive some remarkable similarities²⁰. Most of the psychics discovered their special capacity in their youth. Dulce Maria says, “From childhood on I have been mediumistic and possessed paranormal gifts.” In some cases this was ignored or even oppressed. Linda Louise reports, “I did not understand why other people did not comprehend me, because I empathised with them.” Later appreciation came, for instance when a recognised psychic identified their special capacities. This launched them on a protracted period of learning, experience and exercise. After obtaining certificates for performing specific treatments a practice is started. All psychics sum up their specialities; most of them have five to ten certificates, varying from tarot techniques to something like *Transformational Breath Facilitator* (Erik van der Heijden). The usual skills (about half the group) are clairvoyance and tarot card reading; quite popular are Reiki and astrology. Unique offers are *fytotherapy* (herbs), terminal care, a *sjamanca* (a feminine shaman), and a dog whisperer. Psychics’ work is inspired by a kind of idealism to heal people physically and spiritually. Erik Roesink writes:

Now I know how to handle my sensibility, this has motivated me to do this beautiful work, in order to inspire others and to assist them with all their vital questions, problems, dilemmas, blockages, fears, and uncertainties.

Only a few of them give a name to their source or “the other side”. Gerda Smits reports that, “The very beautiful part of this work is that I can be the station between heaven and earth.” Kurt says, “The Source from which the soul originates is perfect.” Linda Louise mentions “the divine source.” Maria Bogers maintains, “I provide the divine energy (which you are as well) with colour.” Tilly Brants writes, “By the grace of God and my guides I can offer help where it is needed.”

Both Erik Roesink and Erik van der Heijden testify to a physical crisis in their lives. Erik Roesink underwent several major operations between the ages of four and eight, which caused special experiences. Erik van der Heijden tells of what happened when he was 19: “Around Christmas 2003 I met with an accident. In the period after the accident, the intuitive in me awoke, and I started to work with it actively.”

Linda Louise, by contrast, sounds quite cheerful:

²⁰ www.astrotv.nl/persoonlijke-paginas [accessed: 1–15.06.2010]; transl. F.J.

I am an indigo child (New Age child). I am clairknowing, clairhearing and clairfeeling. ... I accurately sense other people's moods and problems. ... Spirituality is in my genes: my ancestors were Indians.

Sonia Pereira, probably Astro TV's most prominent anchor person, relates on her personal website that she was born on a lucky day, with positive symbols²¹. She hails from Cape Verde, from a "mediumistic and spiritual family". Thus, she grew up with special visions and developed her gifts. She had "various experiences with Angels" and obtained some certificates for practice as a medium. On the television show she is famous for her sense of humour. She is also active as an actress and singer in the band *Angel Voices*. She is young and not white, in common with several other members of the varied Astro TV team.

2. Theories on power and gender in spiritualities

Before expounding the theories of Bourdieu, Wood and Woodhead on power and gender I explain my view of spirituality and its relation to religion. "Spirituality" became an umbrella term for alternative religious, therapeutic and medical services in the 1990s. In an overview in 2006 Lucy Bregman presents a short history of the concept of spirituality. Before 1980 the term was reserved for immaterial, especially sacred things, organised piety and the clergy. The main association was with Christian mysticism or virtuousness, such as that professed by Roman Catholic monks in their quest for God, and with ecclesiastic and ascetic properties²². This meaning is still current; I call it "theistic spirituality" because it is based on belief in a personal God. The second connotation concerned spirits that send messages, an approach ordinarily called spiritualism. Furthermore, after 1980 the concept of spirituality was used in humanistic psychology as "a way to label universal, essential capacities for freedom and transcendence"²³. It also became popular in the sphere of alternative services offered by psychics and therapists to indicate both the higher powers with which they operate and the psychological balance they claim to create. Bregman refers to an inventory of 92 definitions of spirituality²⁴. She herself considers it to be personal, "residual religion", a "label for interior human capacity and link to ultimacy and transcendence"²⁵.

I suppose that Bregman is too quick to identify spirituality with personal religion, whereas it is obvious that spirituality, especially in my case of divination, is used

²¹ www.sonia.nl/biografie [accessed: 15.06.2010].

²² L. Bregman, *Spirituality: a Glowing and Useful Term in Search of Meaning*, "Omega, the Journal of Death and Dying" 2006, No. 53, p. 5–26 (6–9). Cf. J. Carrette, R. King, *Selling Spirituality...*, p. 33–38.

²³ L. Bregman, *Spirituality...*, p. 6. Cf. J. Carrette, R. King, *Selling Spirituality...*, p. 39–42.

²⁴ L. Bregman, *Spirituality...*, p. 9–12.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 24 and 7.

for secular activities and ideas as well²⁶. For this reason, I prefer the definition of spirituality from the large series on *World Spirituality*. In the Preface to each volume, general editor Ewert Cousins offers this definition, which should cover both mysticism in the world's religions and secular spirituality (with inner-worldly supreme or transcendent values).

The series focuses on that inner dimension of the person called by certain traditions “the spirit”. This spiritual core is the deepest centre of the person. It is here that the person is open to the transcendent dimension; it is here that the person experiences ultimate reality. This series explores the discovery of this core, the dynamics of its development, and its journey to the ultimate goal...²⁷

To distinguish theistic spirituality from the other types (such as the secular ones) I subsume the border region of both “under the qualification of holistic spirituality. By holistic I mean a view of the world and people based on an immanent, all-pervading life force, everything touching everything, and the necessity of seeking a balance between body, mind, spirit and cosmos (or life force). Both types of spirituality are still practised, with many variations²⁸.

Theistic spirituality is generally religious, but holistic spirituality can be either religious or secular. In principle, following Bourdieu, I call religion that social field in which people cultivate a religious *habitus* or disposition by means of earthly rituals, morals and doctrine, devotion to a higher or sacred order of reality symbolised as god(s) in order to obtain wellbeing or salvation from it²⁹.

In most spiritual divinatory practices belief in the holistic principles of reality is expressed in a rich symbolism that often leads to what we can analogously call a long-lasting “holistic *habitus*”. However, some participants show subsequent actions and ideas that are pious and devoted to what is called the sacred – in short, religious. But most actions and ideas on television shows and websites with regard to “the other side” are only respectful towards something inner-worldly, without worship – in short, secular. Actually, the distinction is often hard to make. For one thing, in both (religious and secular) spiritual practices the supreme force or people's inner core may be called “divine”.

Bourdieu conceives of power as the coercive influence of one person or institution over other(s), also in religion³⁰.

²⁶ F. Jaspers, *The Scientific Study of Religious and Secular Spiritualities*, “Journal of Religion in Europe” 2011, No. 4, p. 328–354. P. Van Ness, *Introduction: Spirituality and the Secular Quest* [in:] *Spirituality and the Secular Quest*, P. Van Ness (ed.), New York 1996, 1–16; P. Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life*, p. 167–174.

²⁷ E. Cousins, *Preface to the Series* [in:] *Spirituality and the Secular Quest*, p. XII.

²⁸ F. Jaspers, *The Scientific Study...*, p. 348–351.

²⁹ P. Bourdieu, *Legitimation and Structured Interest in Weber's Sociology of Religion* [in:] *Max Weber, Rationality and Modernity*, S. Lash, S. Whimster (eds.), London 1987, p. 119–136 (122). This Weberian view on religion is nowadays represented by for instance Martin Riesebrodt, *The Promise of Salvation: a Theory of Religion*, Chicago 2010.

³⁰ P. Bourdieu, *Legitimation...*; T. Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion: Imposing Faith and Legitimacy*, London 2007.

Competition for religious power owes its specificity ... to the fact that what is at stake is the monopoly of the legitimate exercise of the power to modify, in a deep and lasting fashion, the practice and world-view of lay people, by imposing on and inculcating in them a particular religious *habitus*. By this I mean a lasting, generalised and transposable disposition to act and think in conformity with the principles of a (quasi-) systematic view of the world and human existence³¹.

This worldview relates not only to personal wellbeing, but also to one's social position. "Religion has also social functions in so far as the laity expects justification of their existence as occupants of a particular position in the social structure"³². In religion the view of human existence, social structure and world undergoes "a symbolic transmutation", namely into moral rules and a heaven with god(s), and corresponding rituals³³. Religious leaders can deploy symbols ("symbolic violence") to establish their monopolistic power. Bourdieu follows Weber, who concludes that there is a continuing struggle for power between priests (legitimated by their church), prophets (with a message of protest), and magicians (individual practical miracle workers)³⁴. Following Durkheim, he contends that relations in the higher order of reality reflect the structure of classes and power in society³⁵.

Wood uses Bourdieu's theory of religion and power to understand the situation in current British new, holistic spiritualities. His main thesis is that the meditations, healings and other workshops in this dynamic region do little to further the formation of a distinct belief or group³⁶. Many of the providers derive their legitimation from possession by higher spirits. However, they impair their authority by calling upon "multiple authorities" from various traditions³⁷. This relativising attitude allows adherents to behave as clients and prevents the development of devotion, of a religious *habitus*³⁸. Only a few small groups adhere to a more traditional religious identity, for instance Neopagans. In traditional religions authorities exert their power on a depth level through their institutions and thus determine the religious *habitus* of the believers. However, the "non-formative" leaders of the holistic spiritualities are typically ascending members of the working class, mainly women. Even their claims to possession do not guarantee authority, because they lack both religious and social status: their position remains ambiguous³⁹. Thus this spiritual region is a "non-formative" border area of religion, certainly not a form of popular religion (which has powerful authorities and devotions)⁴⁰.

³¹ P. Bourdieu, *Legitimation...*, p. 126.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 124.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 126–134.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 129.

³⁶ M. Wood, *Possession...*, p. 71.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 134.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 154.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 165–167.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 159.

For the topic of religion and gender I turn to Linda Woodhead, who headed a research group on religion and gender⁴¹. Holistic spiritualities involve mainly women, so we have to reflect on the feminine factor. The content of femininity is always culturally conditioned. Sointu and Woodhead quote Iris Young:

Femininity is taken to refer to a set of structures and conditions that delimit the typical *situation* of being a woman in a particular society, as well as the typical way in which this situation is lived by women themselves⁴².

Woodhead placed her analysis in the context of social history, focusing more on the supply side of holistic spirituality⁴³. Industrial modernisation offered many opportunities for men in professional and public life, whereas most women were confined to domestic labour and private life. Later in the 20th century cultural changes (non-manual occupations, effective forms of contraception) gave women greater access to jobs and public life. However, many women still perform a larger proportion of caring work than men; they have a double workload, both at home and in paid employment⁴⁴. Traditionally, there were three domains where women were allowed to build their identity: health care, beauty and religion. At present these are combined in a powerful formula of holistic spirituality or alternative medicine⁴⁵. Starting with physical care, women can offer and find here a protected milieu for discovering deep feelings, desires and qualities.

Woodhead also distinguishes between social classes. She asserts that generally highly educated women will be secularised— they find an adequate personal identity in their jobs. At the other end of the social spectrum working-class women often remain traditional and “home-centred”. If religious, they join traditional religions. It is middle-class women, carrying the heavy burden of both a family and a job, who may create a kind of “a space of their own” in holistic spirituality⁴⁶. Nevertheless, members of all three classes may find their own support in such spirituality.

Finally, this author defends the female involvement in spirituality against reproaches of narcissism on the one hand, and the perpetuation of traditional gender roles and the oppression of women on the other. She argues that holistic spirituality provides both a legitimization of traditional femininity and a reversal of gender roles. “As holistic spiritualities tap into and celebrate forms of femininity centred on everyday relationality and caring, they legitimate an affective selfhood centred on reciprocal disclosure of feelings”⁴⁷. Bodily care and warm relations can be seen as continuing the traditional family caring role of women. “By contrast, holistic spiritualities

⁴¹ *Women and Religion in the West: Challenging Secularization*, K. Aune, S. Sharma, G. Vincett (eds.), Aldershot 2008.

⁴² E. Sointu, L. Woodhead, *Spirituality, Gender...*, p. 260; emphasis original.

⁴³ L. Woodhead, *Why so many Women in Holistic Spirituality? A Puzzle Revisited* [in:] *A Sociology of Spirituality*, K. Flanagan, P. Jupp (eds.), Aldershot 2007, p. 115–124 (116–120).

⁴⁴ L. Woodhead, *'Because I'm Worth It': Religion and Women's Changing Lives in the West* [in:] *Women and Religion in the West*, p. 147–161 (150).

⁴⁵ L. Woodhead, *Why so many Women...*, p. 120.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 118–120; L. Woodhead, *Because I'm...*, p. 150–151, 158.

⁴⁷ E. Sointu, L. Woodhead, *Spirituality, Gende...*, p. 268.

insist that the worth of each individual lies in the unique ‘core’ or ‘soul’ that each and every single person is seen to possess⁴⁸. All in all, in spirituality and alternative medicine these aspects are emancipatory, because women are the providers and have the authority⁴⁹. In the event the holistic milieu transforms some traditional feminine qualities into general human ones in an egalitarian practice of independence and self-fulfilment, which erodes traditional gender roles⁵⁰.

3. Power on Astro TV: gentle coercion and holistic indoctrination

The structure of power on Astro TV and with holistic spiritualities or alternative medicine is actually generally quite simple. There are two main levels: the most visible is the foreground, where practitioners treat clients; then, less visible in the background, are holistic organisations interacting with practitioners and clients. Next, I apply Bourdieu’s theory and Wood’s ideas to these two levels. Finally, I look at the relation of the higher (symbolic) reality with the social structure.

At the first level, the practitioners such as the psychics on Astro TV treat clients. The treatments in the television programme are examples, but they are extremely short and there is hardly any reward. A normal consultation generally costs between 30 and 50 euro an hour. In that case a client exchanges economic for symbolic capital. The initiative lies with the client. She pays and declares (some) trust in the practitioner. As described in section 1, this leads to a script with fairly fixed roles and phases. The client discloses her problem(s), the practitioner conveys some important signs, and then they deliberate over the interpretation of the signs, resulting in a diagnosis and advice or treatment.

At first sight it seems as if the practitioner or psychic exercises power over the client. However, in the foregoing phases there are only two moments of dominance: the establishment of the signs and imparting the advice. In the other phases the client has an equal say. Especially in the interpretation of the signs the client’s experience carries much the same weight as the practitioner’s knowledge⁵¹. In regard to the signs, the interpretation and the experience, these use the rich symbolism of the holistic discourse. Next, it is obvious that the practice usually consists of this symbolic discourse and the related rituals (use of tools, treatment with massage, etc.). By and large, the practitioner can try to exercise symbolic violence, but the client can always refuse. Violence can be used only when the psychic enjoys considerable authority and trust. She has to build up this authority in a free market situation, and here she will get help from the organisation (second level). I doubt if Wood is correct when he asserts that the authority of psychics is subverted by their use of multiple sources, because I observe that this use is in fact characteristic of the holistic milieu. Besides, his idea of possession is not observable in the psychics on Astro TV; their legitimation is weaker

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 270.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 268–270.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 273.

⁵¹ Cf. P. Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life...*, p. 119–123.

– only a claim to channelling. The reading of esoteric signs (astrology, tarot cards) and the manipulation or magic (calling up the spirit of a deceased person; Reiki imposition of hands) can be interpreted as kinds of symbolic violence. Generally such power has the character of persuasion and gentle coercion. Finally, the purpose of a consultation or treatment has an aspect of power as well: to solve the client's (psychological) problems and restore or improve her holistic equilibrium. Ordinarily this can be called empowerment, but in order to avoid the ambivalent concept of power, for this individual process I prefer the term "reinforcement".

Television as a mass medium does not seem to have much influence on this level. In a sense the Astro show is just a filmed version of what happens at paranormal fairs (cf. the announcement of Astro TV as "home shopping"). Meyer's assertion that the medium remains more or less invisible is correct on this level: clients on television behave in the same way as at fairs. However, I do not notice any new "semiotic ideology" or the transformation of holistic spirituality that Meyer expects. Only at the second level does one observe a change.

For both practitioners and clients, power at this second or depth level emanates from the organisation. I perceive this power in the representation of Astro TV in the show as a firm offering psychics and services. Here the power exercised is not clear: it looks like an innocent offer or an advertisement. However, its symbolic violence strikes me as quite heavy and influential. I think it is part of the torrent of information, the holistic ideology to which the Western world is continually subjected⁵². In this respect I agree with Partridge about the re-enchantment of the West, in other cultural areas as well such as ecology, pop music, computer games, etc. More than at the first level, this is where the "holistic *habitus*" is "imposed and inculcated" (Bourdieu). The originator of this second-level power is often unclear. As far as I know, the company SBS owns Astro TV. However, it is difficult to find out who is the agent behind the indoctrination in Astro TV and similar television programmes. On the whole, such firms produce for profit, so the holistic ideology seems to be just a means, to be used as long as the public consumes it.

Bourdieu points out elites in traditional religions. On Astro TV I observe that there is just a small variegated layer of elite psychics, but hardly any centre. Overall, the holistic milieu is very diversified and non-hierarchically organised. Actually most providers have small enterprises. They have their own certificates and professional organisations⁵³. This milieu is not strictly defined – it appears to be a free market. It is opposed to regular medical and psychological health care and, implicitly, both to traditional churches and a materialistic way of life. However, because of the free market system hardly anybody is excluded: anyone with a shred of (holistic) belief and trust can participate. The providers do not perform as monopolists. Still, it remains intriguing to discover who direct(s) these spiritualities. Carrette and King remain un-specific, merely asserting that holistic spiritualities are abused by capitalism. Wood, however, underestimates this second level of holistic institutions. I showed that they

⁵² Cf. S. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age*, London–New York 2006, p. 125–145.

⁵³ F. Jespers, *Holistische spiritualiteit...*, p. 190–191.

really have an influence and provide practitioners with authority, for instance on the website and the television show.

My last point is the relationship between higher-order reality and social structure. Around 1990 the holistic worldview indisputably underwent a “symbolic transmutation”, for example in the Asian indications and pseudo-scientific talk. However, Bourdieu also asserts that this higher-order reality reflects and enhances the social status quo. The general idea of a holistic, higher-order reality is that a universal life force like the sun or the *Tao* sustains everything: it is a caring, impersonal providence. At a lower level forces such as the stars, angels or spirits of the deceased are more accessible or manipulable. The path of everyone’s life is preordained, and training through a series of lives is for becoming complete and happy. This symbolic order reflects a late-modern liberal, egalitarian society, where people can develop their capacities on a free market, but accidents can happen as well as a result of bad karma or lack of knowledge, and where a bit of magic is also possible⁵⁴.

Holistic spiritualities therefore reflect and endorse late-modern, liberal, individual life and society. Wood overestimates the religious character of holistic spiritualities and misses their secular character. Although Astro TV may function as a religion for some participants because of its religious symbolism, the absence of a religious *habitus* makes it at most a functional equivalent of religion for most other adherents. Nonetheless, Wood’s conclusion that spiritualities are “non-formative” is sharp but not exclusive. All borderline regions and many popular forms of most cultural fields (such as education, industry, politics, sport or the arts) are “non-formative”. Thus, the holistic milieu is no monopolistic religion, but for a large part takes the form of secular human care service and entertainment. It uses the gentle coercion of advertising persuasion and “infotainment”. In effect its power resembles not political power, but market value.

4. Gender in Astro TV: enjoyment and self-esteem

I analyse three aspects of gender in Astro TV, mainly on the basis of Woodhead’s ideas on holistic spiritualities. Firstly, I look at the feminine qualities she ascribes to the work atmosphere of the holistic milieu. Here I focus on wellbeing in Astro TV. Secondly, I examine the purpose and effects she distinguishes, and compare these with the gender elements in the autobiographies of the psychics. The third aspect is class involvement and gender role criticism. The opposition between feminine and masculine values will inevitably crop up, but I am aware of their historical and cultural conditioning.

First, Woodhead characterises the holistic milieu (in the broad sense, from Neopaganism to spiritual wellness) as an atmosphere of (bodily) care, intimacy, warm connections and strong emotions. Astro TV confirms these characteristics, but other qualities such as commercial and symbolic presentations must be mentioned as well.

⁵⁴ *Idem, Paranormal Market...*

The symbolism tends to be feminine because of the primacy of corporeal signs, which refer to conditions that delimit the situation of being a woman in our society (Young).

There are no hard figures on participation in terms of gender. As mentioned, of the 31 “spiritual specialists” on Astro TV 26 are women, that is 84%. My rough count of clients on the television show yields around 75% women. Such figures suggest a large female majority. The atmosphere of corporeal symbolism and care, of intimacy and warm connections, and of strong emotions appears to have a far greater attraction for women than for men.

Enjoyment of spirituality accentuates this difference. Women appear to enjoy spirituality as a form of wellness with its bodily care, its attention to emotions and its playfulness (cards, deliberations). Of course, in traditional religions, men also enjoy certain aspects of theistic spirituality, such as complex rituals, solemn church music or subtle theological arguments. But these are generally ponderous things. However, pleasure in spiritual wellness is completely different: it is light, corporeal and optimistic. I also suppose that when such spirituality has a religious component, the image of the divine corresponds with this enjoyment: a light, natural and caring life force as opposed to the grave, complex transcendent God of traditional religions. This does not mean that holistic spirituality is superficial and easy, or denies the dark side of life. Astro TV in fact focuses exclusively on life’s problems, on major troubles.

Secondly, Woodhead describes the purpose and results of the holistic milieu as self-esteem, independence and self-fulfilment. On Astro TV the purpose and results can be called reinforcement or holistic health. Again the corporeal aspect is prominent. The effects on the clients are hard to measure, but the self-confidence of the “spiritual specialists” is obvious. Here a closer look at the self-presentations of the psychics shows a remarkable difference between men and women. Most of the men embarked on a troubled career after a problematic youth, crises, hesitations and struggle⁵⁵. Their vocation is burdensome and brings an element of tragedy into their lives. The women usually slip more easily into their spiritual profession; they enjoy the show they perform. The male image is a bit grim, his authority gloomy. The female image is playful, her authority optimistic. In anthropological terms, both sexes perform as healers, but men resemble a “wounded healer” or shaman; women are more like magicians, “wise women” or herbalists⁵⁶. The autobiographies of the women corroborate Woodhead’s description.

The third point is class involvement and criticism of gender roles. When it comes to female involvement according to class, I observe some differences from Woodhead. Upper-class women do engage in spiritual activities, albeit probably less in popular forms like Astro TV. However, some glossy magazines offer many expensive kinds of spiritual activities and therapies, so these must be used extensively. In addition some upper-class women will secretly consult astrologers or mediums, as do prominent politicians and businesspeople. However, Astro TV is typically a show

⁵⁵ Cf. S. Aupers, D. Houtman, *Spiritual Supermarket...*, p. 206–209.

⁵⁶ F. Bowie, *The Anthropology of Religion: An Introduction*, Malden–Oxford 2000, p. 104–106, 205–206.

for lower-class women, as its general service probably is as well. I take half of the “spiritual specialists” on Astro TV to be middle-class to semi-lower-class when I read their none too literate texts on websites and hear their vocabulary and pronunciation (sometimes dialects) on the show. Since 1990 the milieu of holistic spirituality has grown more popular, so all classes, all age groups and probably also ethnic minorities make use of it, although it started as a white middle-class activity.

As for the critical or uncritical effect, I think Woodhead is right. To some degree Astro TV confirms existing gender roles. The hostesses are attractive women. At the same time they preach independence and are fully in charge. They radiate a kind of joyful self-esteem. All this can be emancipating for middle-class and certainly for lower-class women, as Woodhead indicates. The show really is “infotainment”: it offers both spiritual fun and guidelines for women’s independence⁵⁷. However, transformation of gender roles is hardly apparent.

Conclusions

Astro TV is part of the holistic divinatory services which present themselves as spirituality, not as religion. Indeed, they offer contributions to personal development (regaining equilibrium) by channelling messages from an assumed higher (transcendent) dimension of reality, an activity which corresponds with my definition of spirituality. The methods in such services – diagnosing and advising – are secular, but the channelling often echoes religious associations. Still, such religious fragments do not make Astro TV a religion, but at most a functional equivalent of it.

The question of power in holistic spirituality could be clarified with the help of examples from Dutch Astro TV. There is a direct level where a practitioner exercises power over a client, usually in the form of gentle coercion. The practitioner dominates to some extent, which may happen during the presentation of esoteric signs and deciding on advice. However, for the rest of the session she is dependent on the trust and contributions of the client. All this is greatly influenced by the background (second level) of institutional power in the popular media, which is diffuse but quite strong. Here a clear agency is lacking and the organisations are highly diversified. However, this torrent of holistic, more or less magic symbolism is on the one hand a remarkable representation of our late modern, liberal society, but on the other hand only marginally emancipatory for both women and men.

Next the gender issue was clarified, mainly drawing on the self-presentations of some spiritual specialists on Astro TV. This type of holistic spirituality has qualities which women appreciate, such as (corporeal) care, intimacy, warm connections, and strong emotions. Hence it is not surprising that participants are predominantly female. However, I added the quality of enjoyment, specified as light, optimistic playfulness associated with wellness. I also indicated that the purpose and results are reinforcement, independence and self-esteem. Such ideals give the holistic milieu

⁵⁷ Cf. P. Heelas, *Spiritualities of Life...*, p. 206–207.

some emancipatory impetus, especially for lower-class women and girls, who are increasingly engaging in holistic spirituality.

Finally, the results of the power and gender analysis can lead to the conclusion that spiritual practices such as Astro TV are too commercial and magical to make a real contribution to the wellbeing of the women and men of our society. Indeed, such holistic practices form a peculiar but actually not very expensive growth market in Western popular care services. Nevertheless, it is important to note that many clients appear to derive some support from them – probably also because of their entertaining qualities. Scholars are left with the task of collecting reliable data on the effects of divinations and similar practices before firm conclusions can be drawn.