

Wilfully Disempowered

Day, Abby

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Wilfully Disempowered

A Gendered Response to a 'Fallen World'

Abby Day

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

ABSTRACT Two cases from the UK are discussed to explore why, in the author's terms, women wilfully disempower themselves in religion and spiritual contexts. A case study of a women's prayer group shows how they resist acknowledging their own power or the idea that they are engaging in informal ritual equally important to their male counterparts. Second, qualitative data from a large study of people's beliefs are used to show how women willingly submit to a higher male power through a process of self-denigration. It is argued that the women are making rational, strategic choices in an increasingly secular and patriarchal world.

KEY WORDS gender ♦ patriarchy ♦ religion ♦ secular ♦ spiritual ♦ women

In this article I explore a phenomenon I observed during empirical research in the UK: the apparent willingness of women, more than men, to disempower themselves in exchange for supernatural protection and a feeling of belonging. Two case studies are compared in this article. My analysis focuses on a motif of the 'fallen world', which appeared to be shared among many of my informants and can provide, I argue, at least partial explanations for a gendered form of wilful disempowerment in a secularizing world.

The first case uses data from my Lancaster University master's dissertation (Day, 2001) about a Baptist women's prayer group in North Yorkshire, UK. The Master's Programme in Religion, Culture and Society represented a major turning point in my life and career when, at age 41, I left a publishing background and re-entered academe to study the sociology of religion.

The second case study uses data from doctoral research I conducted between July 2002 and May 2006, where I probed 'belief' without asking overtly religious questions, such as 'Do you believe in God?'

I now turn to each case in more detail.

COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES

Baptist Women's Prayer Group

The women who allowed me to observe their prayer group had been meeting every Wednesday morning for more than 10 years, which prompted me to refer to them as 'the Wednesday Women'.¹ I gained access to the group through asking an acquaintance who attended if I could approach the group and seek members' permission to study them for my MA dissertation. With little academic training in religion or research, I was unsure how to begin my research, but was advised by my supervisor to observe the group for a time and see what came up. I was further encouraged by reading Skeggs's (1997: 22) comment:

I knew little about methodology and began the research by just hanging around and talking to the women as much as possible.

When the group first began meeting about 10 years before, they were full-time carers of their preschool children. They now worked part-time as, predominantly, nurses, caring assistants and office workers.

At my first meeting, I was struck by their apologies for what seemed to me to be fairly innocuous social conversation. My main contact, Jane, said that they usually sat together in the living room drinking their tea or coffee and 'chatting' until suddenly someone would notice the time and say, 'oh dear, we really should spend less time chatting! And that's what happens every week!' That the women denigrated their 'chatting' puzzled me, and it was a question to which I returned several times in interviews and later when interpreting my data.

I identified that in their 'chatting' they reviewed what had happened to the people for whom they had prayed at previous meetings. Their prayers were usually for people they knew, such as a daughter who was lonely during a period overseas, or a friend with back pain, a relative with cancer or a husband who was unemployed. When they reviewed progress during their meetings, during their so-called 'chatting', I was struck by how few prayers had been answered: the daughter remained friendless, the back pain continued, the relative died from cancer, the husband was still jobless. The focus of my study then became an analysis of how they continued their faith when confronted by the disappointment of unanswered prayer. How people reconcile bad events, or at least disappointment, in a world supposedly ruled by a good, all-powerful God, is a complex but necessary process for religious believers: the consequences of admitting that God had withdrawn His love and protection would be a chaotic disruption of the known cosmos, not only for the individual but for others sharing that worldview. By reconciling the

apparent discontinuity between perfect love and terrible events, the believers restore order to their worldview. How they do this is known in theological circles as 'theodicy', a term proposed by the 18th-century rationalist philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, using two ancient Greek words, a divine being or god (*theos*) and justice (*dike*).

Theodicy may help people resolve, if only temporarily, the apparent contradictions between suffering and God's all-powerful love. Berger (1967: 53) argued that the purpose of theodicy is not to bring happiness to the suffering individual but rather to confer meaning onto circumstances which might otherwise appear chaotic. I observed how the Wednesday Women created theodicy as they 'chatted' about events, what they might mean and how the outcome was to be understood as an answer from God, even if it was not the answer or result they had originally wanted. The 'chatting' therefore, I concluded, operated as an essential mechanism in what I theorized was a 'ritual of theodicy' (Day, 2005). My theory (Day, 2001, 2005) drew mainly on anthropological literature relating to symbolism, ritual and power. (See, for example, Austin, 1962; Bell, 1992, 1997, 2000; Geertz, 1973.) What the women had dismissed as 'chatting', I interpreted as important spiritual labour.

When I discussed my conclusions with the women, they disagreed that their 'chat' helped them reconcile any potential disappointment between actual events and their view of God. Any peace or understanding they gained, they said, was exclusively a gift from God, not their own labour. They wilfully rejected their own power or influence in restoring their worldview.

Some of their reaction may be explained in reference to the theology of the Baptist tradition. Weber, for example, concluded that Baptists believe that God speaks to them through their consciences, with revelation coming through the Holy Spirit that is active in their lives (Weber, 1992: 144–54).

A rejection of rules, priestly teachers and the Bible as sole authority characterizes the Baptist sect, Weber argued. While that might, indeed, be part of the teaching within the Baptist church, I observed what appeared to be a contradiction: while the women seemed to dismiss their own spiritual labour, they respected the spiritual labour of men. For example, on several occasions Jane would refer to her husband leading the prayers at home and recounted how she often asked him for encouragement or insight, which he had done by providing her with a quote from scripture. Her husband also leads a men's group called 'Maximising Manhood', based on an American model, which 'shows men how to be a leader in their own homes', she told me. I noted that Jane deferred to her husband as spiritual leader in their lives.

Several sociologists of religion also minimize the power of women's spiritual labour. In Wuthnow's (1994: 358) study of small groups, including church-based groups dominated by women, he concluded that a

certain type of wisdom was missing because members did not pay sufficient attention to theological arguments:

In simplest terms, the sacred comes to be associated with small insights that seem intuitively correct to the small group rather than wisdom accrued over the centuries in hermitages, seminaries, universities, congregations and church councils.

This, I suggest, is a gendered perception of wisdom, as men, not women, have traditionally inhabited hermitages and seminaries, and dominated the universities, congregations and church councils. Wuthnow seems to be implying that women who discuss and pray about everyday problems are not doing serious work, whereas men who inhabit male institutions, spend time in contemplation and discuss centuries-old theological ideas constructed by other men, are doing serious work.

His orientation reflects other male-constructed theories and definitions in anthropology and sociology that tend to focus on milieus inhabited by men and thus tend to universalize and marginalize women through ignoring anything specific about women's experience and constructs (Bowie, 2006).

Woodhead (2000: 67–84) argues that this 'gender-blindness' is a feature of the sociological study of religion. She described Weber's idea of the iron cage and Durkheim's concept of anomie as particularly oriented to men because both assume participation in the public realm, a realm from which women were traditionally excluded. I also found it difficult to apply to women Weber's theories on why different groups of people were attracted to different kinds of religions and what their roles may be within those institutions (Weber, 1992, 1993).

Weber's analysis of affinities for a particular type of religion is based on what were at his time of writing men's economic conditions and occupations: the warrior, the peasant, the artisan, the missionary, the tent-maker, the prince, the capitalist and so on (Weber, 1993: 95–117). He did not suggest female equivalents to help explain the experience of nurses, teachers, low-paid or unpaid domestic labourers such as wives and mothers.

While I was aware, in my own pursuits in religious studies, of how theorists often negated or denigrated women's labour, both material and spiritual, I was unprepared for how the women I observed appeared to do it as well. I have already mentioned that they dismissed the power of their 'chatting' as unimportant, but I also observed how they often created theodicy by blaming women for the problems they observed.

At one meeting, for example, when we were discussing why they thought bad things often happened when a good God was supposedly in charge, Pat answered simply: 'we live in a fallen world; we wait to go with the Lord'. The 'fallen world', in a religious context, refers to the story of Adam and Eve being expelled from the perfect Garden of Eden by God, as a consequence of Eve eating the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.

Helen later commented that 'we' were not blameless for the problems and suffering 'we' have in this world: 'I think we bring it on ourselves within our personal lives, within society', she said. One of their most animated discussions occurred when Pat, a nurse, expressed her worry that she may be required to dispense the 'morning-after pill'. This would be, she explained, tantamount to assisting an abortion.

While they were discussing how to pray to God to discourage teenagers from having sex, Jane exclaimed: 'It's not just teenage pregnancy! It's litter and it's having dinner in front of the TV!' They then discussed 'parents' not being as involved as they should be with their children. In their discussion, and in the other case study that follows, I listened to how 'parent' and 'people' were being used and suggest they are most often codes for 'mothers' and 'women' as they tend to relate to a strictly domestic sphere. The conflation of teenage pregnancy, litter, dinner in front of the TV and absent parents conjured an image of not just a fallen society, but a fallen family where a woman is not doing her job as a responsible wife and mother. The Wednesday Women's roles as full-time mothers when their children were young, and then as part-time workers, may have reinforced their sense of responsibility for the success, or failure, of the domestic realm – and their perceived culpability for the fall of the world.

Given that they were involved in a Baptist church, part of a conservative branch of Christianity, the issue of their 'traditional' responsibilities may also have been heightened.

For a woman who belongs to a conservative religion, maintaining an ascribed feminine role can be a powerful act of agency and resistance to a secularizing world. Woodhead (2001: 336–60), in a post-Weberian approach to understanding religious affinities, argued that an important part of women's attraction to some religions lies in the availability and nature of spaces that enable them to articulate their desires. This, she suggests, is a function of the nature and extent of social differentiation. Conservative brands of religion such as the Baptist form of Christianity, as I observed with the Wednesday Women, respond to modernity within society by increasing differentiation. This results in an increase of the importance for women of domestic, private social space. It may also result in further difficulties for women to leave those spaces. Despite apparent progress in the feminist agendas relating to reproduction and employment, women attending the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing noted that conservative religious alliances are resisting that progress (Bracke, 2003: 345). Following West and Zimmerman (1987: 145), I suggest my data illustrate how social differentiation assigns everyday personal matters and emotional labour to women. Viewed through a lens of differentiation, the Wednesday Women's act of what I term wilful disempowerment seems a rational strategy to preserve their religious tradition and their place within an increasingly secular world. The motif of 'the

fallen world' to which the Wednesday Women referred resonated in my fieldwork within the wider culture outside their religious domain, and it is to that wider culture I now turn.

A Yorkshire Ethnography

My doctoral research between 2002 and 2006 was provoked by a finding in the UK 2001 census where 71.6 percent of respondents identified themselves as Christian. While this might present an enduringly religious picture, there were anomalies: fewer than 7 percent of the population is in church on an average Sunday, and the number is decreasing each year; all other forms of participation in traditional Christian rites – from baptisms to confirmations, weddings and funerals – are decreasing (Brierley, 2003). Many scholars in the sociology of religion explain this as 'believing without belonging', arguing that religion – at least Christianity – is simply changing and retreating from the public sphere and losing its broad social significance, rather than disappearing (Davie, 1994; Heelas et al., 2005; Wilson, 1966). Some scholars disagree and say that both practice and belief are declining (Bruce, 1995, 2002; Voas and Crockett, 2005). My challenge in my doctoral research was to answer the question 'what do people believe in nowadays?' through an inductive, qualitative approach where subjective meanings could be derived from the field rather than being imposed at the outset by asking overtly religious questions.

Instead, I asked open questions to probe informants' beliefs and practices related to morality, meaning and transcendence: how they knew rights from wrongs; what or who was most important to them; what made them happy, sad, or afraid; how much control they felt they had over their lives; what they thought happened after death; how they thought life began and what the meaning of life might be (Day, 2006). My 14 months of fieldwork involved more than 200 people aged between 14 and 83, evenly split by gender and cutting across socioeconomic groups.

Census data were used to confirm that the population of the Yorkshire region I studied generally conformed to national averages, particularly related to age, gender, ethnicity and social class. I used a snowballing method, where I chose certain people as 'gatekeepers' and relied on them to introduce me to others. In order to minimize researcher-imposed bias, I presented the research issue as sociological rather than specifically religious. My main analysis relies on 68 semi-structured interviews, one-to-one recorded and transcribed verbatim. Informants typically responded to my questions through examples, often lengthy and impassioned accounts and complex elaborations, which I termed 'belief narratives'. At the end of each interview, I asked people to tell me what they had said in answer to the 2001 census question 'what is your religion?' and why they had answered as they did. Like the census, my study found that most people

said 'Christian'. To my initial surprise, that category was mostly composed of people who appeared 'secular', in that they had already told me during the interview that they did not engage with institutionalized religion, and were either agnostics or atheists. A minority were the 'faithful', who engaged with their faith in their everyday lives, believed in God and Jesus, respected religion (even if they did not attend church regularly) and prayed regularly. Through analysing their interviews using five dimensions of content, sources, practices, salience and function, I concluded that many people claim affiliation to Christianity as an expression of their desire to belong to people like themselves, particularly for ethnic, family or social identity reasons. It was that insight and similar examples from my research that led me to my thesis: 'believing in belonging'. Eventually, I dropped the terms secular and religious in favour of 'anthropocentric' and 'theocentric'. More detail about those findings can be found in my other work (Day, 2006; Voas and Day, 2007).

Returning here to my specific focus on women, I found in my study that twice as many women as men were 'faithful Christians' or broadly theocentric, expressing beliefs in God, spirits, higher powers or other non-institutional spiritualities. This corresponds to wider patterns in the UK, where women outnumber men on all indices of religiosity and spirituality, including church attendance, belief and commitment (see, for example, Brierley, 2003; Heelas et al., 2005; Walter and Davie, 1998). Although I did not ask people about uncanny or supernatural experiences, experience of the supernatural was very common: a third of informants reported something of this sort, irrespective of age and social class. Reports varied from feeling the presence of God or deceased relatives, to seeing ghosts or hearing inexplicable sounds. It made little difference, however, whether the respondent was 'secular' or 'religious' and most did not describe such experiences in religious terms. This finding accords with one of the largest, ongoing studies of supernatural experience, which finds most people who experience 'something outside themselves' explicitly disassociate those experiences from named deities or religion (Hardy, 1979; Hay, 1982).

Significantly, in my study more women than men reported supernatural experiences (39 percent vs 25 percent) and discussed those experiences differently. I now turn to exploring in more detail the gender component of supernatural experience.

THE GENDERED SUPERNATURAL

Evidence from my study and my inference from larger studies mentioned in the previous section point to gender, not religiosity, being a predictor of supernatural experience. I focus now on a difference I noted between women and men who discussed their supernatural experiences, which

recalled a theme I had noted in my earlier case study about the Wednesday Women. Female informants discussed the nature of the supernatural as relational, conferring a strong sense of protection and belonging, in contrast with the less emotive and more transient experiences of men. Further, women stressed the importance of submitting to a higher power in ways men did not, again recalling the way the Wednesday Women refused to accord themselves the power of creating 'theodicy'. I called this self-conscious act 'wilful disempowerment'.

A clue to understanding why some women I observed might wilfully disempower themselves in relation to a supernatural power may lie, I explore, in a common feature of some women's belief narratives of a 'fall'. It seemed to be following a crisis or disappointment that led several women to conclude – irrespective of age or social class – that it was better to let a higher power look after them. For example, Becca, 28, an education advisor, said she did not believe in God anymore, does not attend church and did not know how to classify herself anymore in terms of a religion. She recalled the ending of an important relationship, telling me, in bitter tones:

I did have this wonderful life map of what I actually wanted, and it's the usual fairytale of getting married, settling down, and actually making a marriage that works. Nothing big. Just complete happiness for the rest of my life. And it didn't happen, and it doesn't matter how much I can picture it and see it, I don't think it will happen. It just didn't happen and so I've got quite cynical.

It was following the traumatic breakdown of that relationship that she decided, she told me, that relationships were out of her personal control. She said she now trusted in what she called the 'spirit guides' of her deceased grandmother and deceased brother who will guide her to meet the right partner and in general protect her. On one occasion, she said, she woke in the night thinking of her brother and felt very calm, as if 'someone was looking over me'. I note that the spirits were not impersonal entities for her, but the spirits of people with whom she felt she belonged.

A similar story about being protected by a deceased relative following a traumatic event was related to me by a student, Briony, 19. She, like Becca, said she thinks that she is destined to meet certain people, and feels protected by her deceased grandmother, 'sort of there, and sort of looking'. She first sensed the presence of her grandmother when she awoke in hospital after a suicide attempt. She says she likes to think her grandmother is watching over her, not so much controlling what happens to her but 'regulating in a sense' to ensure that not too much harm or disappointment comes her way.

A slightly different relationship with the supernatural was expressed by Rosemarie, a 49-year-old nurse separated from her husband and two

children. She told me about her desire to relinquish her power over relationships by connecting 'with the feminine side, which is going with the flow'. That way, she told me, the 'ultimate man' her 'soul mate' will find her:

I'm seeking the ultimate man, really. I'm seeking the, my soul mate. Sometimes I think I'm seeking it, but sometimes I think, I'm hoping it may find me. I'm hoping it may find me.

This mate will not be, she said, an ordinary man but some kind of god that she described as a 'higher being' in a human man's form. Both Rosemarie and Becca spoke about how they thought there existed an entity or energy that gave the world meaning because it was in control. Rosemarie said: 'I believe in love, that there is love in the world, and there is nurturing. And hope. And that there is some plan in the universe, some reason to be here.'

Rosemarie, Briony and Becca, women different by occupation and age, spoke in similar terms about how they had to give up power over their romantic dreams and direction in order to allow something more powerful than they to act for them. Like the Wednesday Women, they created a theodicy to sometimes reconcile disappointment and renew their relationship with a higher, benign being. The warmth with which they spoke of their spirit guides, or higher powers, suggested an emotional connection and a sense of belonging. Central to their idea of being protected, and even, I suggest, to their idea of their own disempowerment, was their longing for relatedness. Their descriptions contrasted sharply with how men described supernatural experiences.

Phil, 37, a manager in the public sector, practises what he says some might call paganism, but he describes as 'the old ways'. He believes in spirits and other supernatural entities, yet does not think they control his life. In contrast to the women I spoke with, who talked about destiny being out of their control, he described a human-caused 'more instantaneous fate. I believe you have some control over it.' He elaborated:

We always have this fundamental idea that we can control our destiny and our fate, therefore we want to do things in order to do that. And I believe I can do that. I don't believe that the next 30 years of my life is mapped out, but maybe the next few weeks might be mapped out from what I'm doing.

Phil also believes he has power over his personal relationships and can determine much of their outcomes, again, in marked contrast to the kinds of examples I heard from the women quoted earlier. He told me:

If things weren't going so good for me in a friendship or a relationship, then I would sit back and think, ok, what am I doing about that? As a psychological

person, yeah, what are my mannerisms and my behaviour doing to encourage that, but also I would think, ok, what else can I do with my nature and my magic? What can I do to encourage that to change? I would tend to do both, really.

I note his use of the possessive pronoun 'my' in referring to nature and magic, conveying a sense of ownership and perhaps domination over the other powers.

Several men I interviewed also had experiences with entities that might be described as supernatural. Unlike the women quoted earlier, they did not describe themselves as subordinate to supernatural powers and nor did they convey a sense of a continuing relationship with those powers, or a sense that they belonged with them. For example, Chris, 42, an atheist, told me he had seen a ghost, someone from 'another world'. He said he thought one day science would be able to explain such things. Patrick, 49, an atheist, said he had felt the presence of his dead mother, once, on the day of her funeral. He said he did 'not believe that there is any all-powerful force that is organizing human destiny. I think that is utterly ridiculous.'

My finding that supernatural experiences were common, although their interpretation varies by gender, contrasts sharply with some theories about secularization. Along with the 'loss of public significance', secularization theory is the theory that people lose their belief in the power of supernatural entities. Bruce (2002: 200) says he agrees with a definition of religion as including belief in the existence of 'supernatural entities with powers of action'. Shiner (1967: 208) cites G.J. Holyoake, who formed the Secular Society in the 19th-century US with a programme he called 'secularism', defined as a practical philosophy to 'interpret and organize life without recourse to the supernatural'. His reference to 'recourse' runs through later discussions about the secular, particularly with Berger conceptualizing secularization as when people regard their world 'without the benefit of religious interpretations' (Berger, 1967: 107–8).

My analysis does not support those theories. Those informants who volunteered information about supernatural experiences were often those least religious or spiritual. They were, however, mostly women. The key, therefore, to understanding supernatural experience is to look at gender, not religion. In doing so, I have argued that the supernatural experiences reported by women tend to be ones conferring feelings of belonging, reassurance and protection within contexts of disappointment. The mechanism used to effect supernatural protection, be that by God or deceased relatives, is women's submission. Women's wilful disempowerment therefore appears as a reasonable strategy to effect protection and security in what I will now describe as a fallen, and hostile, world.

I return to the discourse of the 'fallen world' begun earlier and examine how it appeared through the narratives of both my anthropocentric,

non-religious informants and my theocentric informants. The argument I develop relies on a discourse that women are responsible for the 'fall' by exercising their personal independence and power, neglecting their families and other domestic responsibilities.

THE FALLEN IN A SECULAR WORLD

A motif of women producing a fallen world ran through many of my interviews. I was not surprised to find a discourse about fallen women among members of the more conservative types of Christianity, such as John, 51. A teacher and part-time pastor, John said: 'I almost weep for society' because it has lost its moral framework, mainly through allowing abortion and divorce to become easier.

In a similar fashion, Vera, 83, a church-attending Christian and housewife, expressed concern that children were not being brought up properly today through 'parental' neglect and lack of discipline.

I also, however, found similar views about women and the 'fallen family' among anthropocentric, 'nominalist' Christians – those who are agnostic, often averse to religion, but who would tick 'Christian' on the census. Barry, 48, a book-keeper, said society has changed 'beyond all recognition, really'. Barry described himself as 'an old-fashioned person' who knew he should behave with honour and loyalty. Those are values that 'seem to be disappearing from our world', he said. He said he had been brought up to:

... hold doors open for women. And all of that kind of thing seems to be disappearing a bit. And no one has time for anyone else anymore. It's a very selfish world that we live in.

I infer from him that it is women who do not allow him to open doors for them, and who are selfish. He also discussed children today not respecting authority. Both he and another anthropocentric Christian nominalist, George, 60, an accountant, presented in separate interviews similar images representing a former better world. That was when, they each said, there was always a local policeman in the village who knew all the children and would report to the children's father if any were misbehaving. The policeman would 'give a slap' to an offending child, and so would the father. Also, neighbours would see what children were doing and would also report on their behaviour. Nowadays, both said, the policemen are gone from the villages and people who live there do not know each other anymore and are often not home during the day.

The difference to which they are alluding, I suggest, is that women are no longer home during the day keeping their eyes on their and other people's children, because they are working.

Katherine, 26, a secretary and anthropocentric nominalist Christian, said she thought raising children properly is very important, and she feels concerned that this is changing now. She explained that: 'I think perhaps, there seems to be a lot more people getting pregnant nowadays, at a younger age, who perhaps can't look after the children.'

Informants' strong views about the 'place' of women also arose among people who said they had no religion. Margaret, 74, said in our interview that she found the changing role of women, and the behaviour of young women, 'frightening'. The examples she gave were wives not cooking for their husbands, and young women swearing on the street. Nicola, 37, said people were a lot happier 30 or 40 years ago when women stayed at home to look after the children. But, it wasn't just women neglecting their children – it was TV:

TV has a lot to answer for I think, with a lot of crap shows on TV now. Well, we have Sky so loads of different channels and sometimes it's unbelievable what really goes on. I think drugs and money, TV, has a lot to do with it.

Hannah, a single, 35-year-old mother of four children, heavily pregnant with her fifth child, described her religious identity as a lapsed Catholic, and referred to herself in terms that seemed to be self-conscious about how other people might see her. When I asked her my first question, 'what do you believe in?' she said the question made her immediately think about values and morals, particularly 'family values'.

She said that although she had very strong ideas about morality, this might appear as 'a contradiction in terms'. She continued, 'Being a divorcee, I do have quite big family values'. I asked her why she thought that might be a contradiction and she said, 'Well, you kind of think, how can I have big family values when I'm a single parent?'

The foregoing illustrations demonstrate that the same motifs, almost to the word, run through the narratives of people as conventionally religious as those I interviewed in the women's prayer group, and among atheists. The fallen world is characterized by teenage pregnancy, abortion, misbehaving children and too much television-watching when selfish women go to work and neglect their families.

DISCUSSION

That women are responsible for society's moral health or downfall is a familiar argument, according to Brown (2001). This relates to a gendered, Christian discourse that located piety in femininity from about 1800 to 1960. He argued that the age of 'discursive Christianity' collapsed during

the 1960s when women stopped subscribing to that discourse and 'the nature of femininity changed fundamentally' (Brown, 2001: 195). While I think Brown has a powerful argument about the nature of discursive Christianity, I am not convinced that the nature of femininity has changed fundamentally for all women. Women do still look after their husbands and children, even while working outside the home.

Hochschild and Machung's (1990) 'second shift' argument illustrates that women in dual-income households still perform the majority of domestic labour, as well as care duties for their immediate and extended families.

The fallen world motif has symbolic value for a range of people irrespective of their religious beliefs. I discovered that it resonates as strongly in the apparently 'secular' world as it does in a prayer group of religiously conservative women. Women who maintain their places within the domestic, 'feminine' sphere are revered, and women who leave that sphere and subordinate role risk hostility and blame for the downfall of their children, communities and other designated parts of the 'world'. This apparently 'natural' scheme of gender relations can be supported through what Walby (1990) describes as 'discursive patriarchy'.

In describing patriarchy as 'a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women' (Walby, 1990: 20), Walby's analysis focuses on how patriarchy can be understood best through exploring structures of production, paid work, the state, male violence, sexuality and cultural institutions, to which I add religion and the family.

Women, as fully conscious agents, are aware of the gendered normative roles and practices operating in contemporary UK society in general, not only in conservative wings of Christianity, but more widely, where men dominate, oppress and exploit women.

Norris and Inglehart (2004) suggest that pockets of religiosity in different societies can be partly explained by conditions that promote and maintain 'existential insecurity'. Religious beliefs in those contexts provide some protection in this world and hope for the next. In my Yorkshire case study, I found tones of 'existential insecurity' resonating through narratives of relationship breakdown or other crises of vulnerability, where some women wilfully disempower themselves in exchange for supernatural protection. As such, their wilful disempowerment can be read as an example of a pragmatic form of belief. In his study of spiritual healing practices in Zambia, Kirsch identified that people switched their loyalty to healers depending on the perceived efficacy of the healer. Their ability to stop believing in one healer and start believing in another illustrated the flexible, malleable and agent-directed nature of belief. Kirsch (2004: 708) described these as 'wilful acts [that] were governed by pragmatism'.

CONCLUSION

In summary, I suggest that what I have read as 'wilful disempowerment' is a self-conscious act on the part of women who desire to maintain a worldview where a higher power is in control and in relationship with them. I have argued that the process of becoming wilfully disempowered involves experiencing a threat to their worldview and existential security through, for example, unanswered prayer or relationship breakdown. This break requires a repair or 'theodicy', effected by the women's affirmation that there is a higher power who will look after them and other matters on earth and submission to that power. I have, further, suggested that a way to read the 'fallen' world is to read it through a patriarchal lens where it is considered natural for women to sustain the family and society. This is particularly accentuated in the cultural institutions of religion and family.

Although it did not appear through this study that a range of other variables, such as age, social class, occupation or education, made a significant difference to how women described their religious or spiritual experiences, the study is small, and those differences might be magnified through future, larger studies. It was notable, however, that my two separate case studies both revealed what I have argued is a striking finding: supernatural experiences are common and unrelated to religious or spiritual beliefs. Further, I found gender was an explanatory and predictive variable: supernatural experiences occur more often with women than men, and are explained by women, not men, in terms of protection, belonging and their self-conscious submission, or wilful disempowerment, in relation to those entities. Further research might fruitfully follow a line of enquiry about belonging and the nature of the supernatural.

NOTE

1. I later discovered that Robert Wuthnow (1994) had coined the same term for a group of women he had studied.

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Abby Day is an ESRC Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Anthropology, University of Sussex, UK, researching religious belief and identity. She completed her MA in religion, society and culture at Lancaster University in 2001, winning the Ninian Smart award for best MA dissertation for her empirical study of a women's prayer group and what she theorized as a 'ritual of theodicy'. Her PhD from Lancaster (2006) 'Believing in Belonging in Contemporary Britain: A Case Study from Yorkshire' explored why non-religious people may claim a 'Christian' identity. Address: Department of Anthropology, Arts D 422, University of Sussex, Brighton, BN1 9RH, UK. [email: a.day@sussex.ac.uk]

