Introduction

As Alberta Giorgi and Roberta Marchisio (2010, 337) contend in their account of modern Europe, the task of describing religious life throughout the continent, including its expression via the hitherto dominant religion, namely Christianity, constitutes a major challenge. This is not least because of varied historical experiences and long-established cultural differences between the nations which comprise the region. To this can be added, as a broad related observation, that not only is Europe increasingly religiously pluralistic, but also the connection between religion and society in the present age is deeply fused to the secular legal framework of individual states, and this consequently impacts the daily lives of believers. Such considerations provide an important recognition that the focus on religion and masculinities in Europe, the topic of this chapter, is obliged to take account of how issues of gender are generated from ‘outside’ as well as ‘inside’ (the primarily theological and conventional views integral to any given faith). ‘Outside’ means where in Europe religion is obliged to respond to the external culture and pressures, including the secular state and other agencies concerned with policy change and implementation in relation to what is generally understood to be matters of social justice (Juschka 2010). Here can be discerned various religious responses that have either endorsed, accommodated, or questioned non-conventional family structures, single-sex relationship and gender issues. This includes direct or indirect repercussions for perceptions of ‘masculinities’ (the different cultural perceptions of masculinity), which may have legal implications in Europe as elsewhere in the Western world.

At the same time, there can be little doubt that the nations of the European continent are currently experiencing profound changes which impact, or may potentially impact, upon religion. In Western Europe, decades of stability, peace and prosperity have now given way to economic insecurities and political change, where so-called populist movements challenge the European Union project of ‘ever greater union’ and programmes of ‘liberal’ reform. The nations of Central and Eastern Europe, once under the hegemony of Communist regimes, have experienced profound changes in their own right since the late 1980s. While liberation saw the jostling of resurfacing conventional forms of religion (as well as fresh religious expression), with secular pressures challenging traditional religious values, the rise of popular nationalist impulses in the East now show signs of restoring those values once more.
Each of these dynamics have over the whole of Europe shaped how religion connects in a reciprocal way to the experiences of men and masculinities within religious institutions and outside of them which, in turn, impact religious belief systems and religious participation. In sum, the kaleidoscope of religiosity in Europe must now be viewed in relation not only to hitherto culturally dominant Christianity, but also to other ‘world religions’ such as Islam, in addition to a vast gamut of fresh forms of religiosity and spirituality. These complexities fashion questions in the field of masculinities and religion in the European context: how are we to understand the apparent ‘gender gap’ between female and male religiosity in Europe? Do conventional established religious authorities continue to defend hegemonic visions of masculinity in a changing continent? To what extent has a growing ‘spiritual marketplace’ permitted men to explore and express non-conventional forms of masculinity? Relatedly, do fresh expressions of spiritual practices conform to conventional ideals of masculinity or are they challenged by men’s lived experiences? To what extent do minority ethnic groups offer alternative cultural norms around masculinities? And, in keeping abreast of current developments, to what degree does the changing political landscape across Europe impact constructs of masculinities?

In this chapter, I begin with a discussion of how men’s religious belief and practice in Europe has been addressed in the literature on gender and religion. This is in terms of either a focus on their statistically lower levels of religious participation than women or the ways in which they are complicit in the patriarchy that defines women’s inferior roles within religious traditions. Building on Krondorfer (1996), the next section of the chapter discusses some of the ways that Christianity has both shaped and been shaped by social norms on masculinities in Europe, but also how, with the ‘feminization’ of Christianity in the nineteenth century and later moves to make Christianity more equal for women, this meant that some men felt that they did not have a place in mainline Christianity any longer, giving rise to conservative movements that aimed to re-establish a space for men. Following this, I discuss how the ‘new spiritual marketplace’ that emerged in the 1960s with new religious movements, and later New Age religion, offered a range of alternative religious and spiritual options for men seeking to redefine masculinities outside of traditional Christianity. The final two sections of the chapter examine the impact of increased ethnic and religious diversity in Europe on masculinities and the rise of nationalist and populist movements, particularly in Eastern Europe, on styles of masculinity that ties national identity to traditional views of the male/female binary supported by Christianity.

**Gender, masculinities and religious participation**

The finely tuned theoretical paradigms that aid the following discussion help one to appreciate developments in the academic understanding of masculinities and the connection with religion in the context of the environment of socio-cultural changes, some of which have already been flagged earlier. It almost goes without saying that the prism through which religion in Europe was habitually viewed by a number of relevant disciplines was that of secularization theory, or a variety of theories or debates regarding religions’ validity. Europe is generally viewed as the most secular region globally and that it even amounts to an ‘exceptionalism’ in a world where high levels of religiosity are largely sustained (Davie 2006). In respect of Europe, for a long time scholars saw an antagonistic polarization. This was a dichotomy between either those individuals strictly adhering to fundamentalist-type religion obliged to respond to a secularizing force or those willing to embrace modern secular ‘progressive’ change. Clearly, the reality is more complex and nuanced. For instance, Kristin Aune (2010, 45) reports how, in the United Kingdom, gender beliefs and practices of evangelical Christians are merely a little more conservative or traditional in taking for granted that the masculine ideal sees men as head of the household,
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while women should embrace the stay-at-home mother role, but nonetheless these conservative Christians have much in common with those of the non-religious population.

As Linda Woodhead (2007) suggests, the preoccupation with secularization is noteworthy in that this focus has invariably forged what she refers to as ‘gender-blindness’, resulting in a narrow gaze on gender that at best has hitherto considered gender and religious participation (lower levels among males compared to females in particular) almost exclusively through perceived secularization processes. Woodhead notes, however, that throughout recent years there has been a discernible shift of concern from the ‘higher’ to the ‘lower’ or more mundane aspects of religion, which has moved at least some of the academic gaze to the body, emotions, space and place and how these relate particularly to matters of gender (Woodhead 2007, 581). Moreover, in recent times the dominant focus on secularization (as almost exclusively denoting the decline of Christianity) has given way to attempts to range wider, addressing such issues as the transformation from traditional forms of religion to encompassing newer, alternative religious and spiritual options in the West, including Europe. While some of this nonetheless reflects secularizing trajectories of human potential and the search for a fulfilling identity (Heelas and Woodhead 2005), it does provide a more fertile ground for investigating gender.

From a rather different perspective, Lucy Delap and Sue Morgan (2013), in their investigation of the influence of profound religious changes on the formation of gender identity in the UK, suggest that men and masculinities have been largely invisible, not least due to the scholarly emphasis upon women as the main inheritors and shapers of religious cultures. The experiences of religiously observant or faithful men, where addressed by academic commentators, have been understood as paradoxical or unrepresentative of broader social, political and cultural trends. Recognizing the legacy of the intellectual criticism of Christianity in the later nineteenth century, as well as by the irreligion of popular culture, Delap and Morgan argue that men have tended to view religious morality and devotional practices as out of keeping with dominant worldly, financially competitive, physically aggressive or sexually promiscuous scripts for modern masculinity (2013).

The undue emphasis on female religiosity, rather than that of males, has been frequently supplemented by the narrow spotlight on the latter gender as mostly expressing their patriarchal dominance over the majority of religious institutional arrangements. This emphasis has been paralleled by the dominant academic view stressing binary gender constructs whereby male religiosity is understood to be primarily the mirror reflection of females. Hitherto, most scholars agreed that, generally speaking, women were more religious and spiritual than men and this had direct or indirect implications for understanding the link between religion and masculinity. Such an assertion was largely based on a range of statistical surveys which consistently indicated that women’s involvement in a wide variety of religious practices was disproportionately higher compared to that of men (Stark 2002). In explaining these differences, the emphasis tended to be focused on socially forged gender roles and psychological predispositions based on notions of femininity and masculinity.

An alternative academic enterprise by Trzebiatowska and Bruce (2012) attempts to critique extant competing biological or psychological explanations to explain differences in men’s and women’s religious belief and participation. However, again, the academic fix on females means that males are often held up merely in terms of comparison. In particular, the researchers purport that religious gender disparity is not specifically rooted in any aspect of biology or psychology (although the authors are obliged to bring them into a number of their arguments). Rather, this disparity is a consequence of important overlapping and reinforcing social and cultural factors. This includes surveying census information confirming higher levels of religious affiliation amongst women, which is presented as evidence of an apparent gender gap in religiosity, with
women seemingly the predominant gender in church membership and attendance, in terms of religious affiliation, and by way of a greater likelihood to adhere to a range of additional religious behaviours.

Trzebiatowska and Bruce\(^2\) consider the traditional activities and roles of women—notably childbirth, child rearing and care of the ill and dying—as a means of understanding women’s link to religion. In relation to childbirth, for example, they observe that the process of pregnancy and childbirth provides women with a unique opportunity, unavailable to men, to engage in additional religious contemplation and modes of behaviour. De Vaus and McAllister (1987) come to similar conclusions and stress a complementary factor by noting how traditional Christian churches emphasize women as custodians of the home. Here, the societal expectation of women to take greater responsibility than men for the upbringing of a child makes religion an attractive investment and this ‘supply-side’ of religion organizes church activities accordingly.

For Trzebiatowska and Bruce (2012), in regards to raising children, women may be more inclined towards religion than men, from the perspective that they view it as their duty to pass on their knowledge of their religion (that is, religious socialization), and in turn to instil a sense of morality in their children. This may be demonstrated through a mother, or other female, being the main source of guidance in preparing children for various religious customs, for example, a Roman Catholic first communion. By contrast, Trzebiatowska and Bruce contend that men, in expressing a core masculine trait, are more likely to take risks than women are, with women, as a result of typically feminine traits—for example, passivity or fearing the prospect of no afterlife—consequently engaging more with religion as a form of risk aversion. Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle (1997) add to such considerations by insisting that female socialization results in women being more likely to subscribe to values commonly found in conflict mediation, sensitivity and humility. By comparison, male socialization is more likely to emphasize non-conformity, thus making the moral guideline aspects of religion less appealing. To this Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle further speculate that the psychological disposition of women to feel emotions at greater heights than men leads them to turn to religion more in times of heightened emotional conditions.

Finally, in considering some basic theory related to masculinity concerning religious participation, an under-reported area concentrates on why, having once participated in religion, men may subsequently depart from institutional allegiance. Among one of the more insightful accounts is that by Richter and Francis (1998), on the reasons and processes by which individuals leave Christian churches. Gender factors are interwoven in people’s explanations, and these more than hint at constructions of masculinity. However, this is not explicitly addressed by Richter and Francis, despite their observation that some women left the churches in search of a ‘more feminine sort of spirituality’; which the churches did not provide. The general underlying pattern is that young males did not attend or stopped attending church because of the absence of participating role models, especially the ‘absent father’ from institutionalized expression of religion. This has had profound implications throughout the generations, and as a result males were more influenced to not attend church by the pressure of peer group male youths (Richter and Francis 1998, 31, 78, 84).

**Christianity and masculinity**

Before addressing masculinities in terms of non-Christian faiths and spiritualities, more might be said of the religion which has long enjoyed cultural dominance, namely Christianity. This religious tradition has played a key role in creating and reflecting dominant masculinities in Europe, to a greater or lesser degree, but has demonstrably declined in influence, at least within Western European nations. Like elsewhere in the world, Christianity in Europe has historically
placed men and women into a divinely mandated order of hierarchical relations within fixed divisions of labour and role expectations. However, there can be little doubt that the religion which has dominated Europe for centuries has been impacted by the profound cultural changes around masculinities. This is scarcely a new development. Björn Krondorfer (2015, 387) points out that with the onset of modernity, the secularization process it generated in Europe forged a crisis for Christian masculine identity. The privatization and sentimentalization of religion in the nineteenth century led to a problem of identification and to the decline of male participation in church life, even when positions of authority remained, for a long time, in the hands of select men who typically belonged to a professional trained clergy.

Yvonne Werner (2011) writes in a similar vein in her volume *Christian Masculinity* that Christian religious practices in the nineteenth century began to be associated with femininity and ‘soft’ gentle values, and ‘the feminisation of religion’ occurred even before Christianity discernibly lost its status as the foundational faith of European society and as incompatible with ‘true’ manhood. Werner not only directs attention to the importance of religion for the understanding of gender construction, but also the necessity, when considering perceptions of masculinity, to take into consideration confessional and institutional aspects of religious identity.

As Krondorfer (2015), writing about churches in the Western world, points out, the mainline churches are continuingly responding to the broader secular demand for greater gender equality, including legal guarantees, and are forced to endeavour to achieve a balance between this and imperatives for holding on to traditional Christian gender expectations. He speaks of what he refers to as ‘modern anxiety’: the struggle over ‘effeminate’ Christianity, suggesting the faith has embraced a ‘gentle moralism’ (2015, 390). This has led to Christianity becoming domesticated and ‘feminized’. Krondorfer (2015, 392) points out that in response to anxieties over effeminization, new ‘manly’ ideals and virtues have been created by conservative constituencies aimed at retaining men’s interest in Christianity and the life of the Church. An ‘effeminized’ Church, conservatives advocate, has little to offer to modern men, hence leading to a lack of affiliation.

In an earlier account, Krondorfer (1996) suggested that what is at stake in such debates are not only the freedom, equality and safeguarding of the rights of women and sexual minorities, but also the identities of Christian men. The ‘effeminized’ Church may, he argued, bring growing gender equality. However, he maintained that there is no surprise that fundamentalist expressions of Christianity bring a defence of ‘traditional’ roles for men and women which involve male headship and female participation in the domestic sphere. However, the more secular Europe has not generated movements like those found in the USA context of a more religious society, such as Promise Keepers and the Million Man March, which blamed gay liberation, sexual liberation and feminism for the breakdown of the family. It could be argued that such movements indicate an uphill battle by conservative Christians to counter popular views of masculinity and general trends within the Christian churches which downplayed traditional male roles.

Such movements, Krondorfer reports, were a response to the emerging men’s movements in the USA that, in turn, constituted a reaction to the profound cultural, political and economic changes in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Western society which destabilized traditional gender roles (1996). The broader spectrum of early religious ideas of masculinity that were grounded in stringent gender arrangements in the churches had become the target of scorn and ridicule of modern secular elites. Thus, while these tendencies have a rather lower profile in Europe than in the USA, it does not distract from the fact that, even conservative evangelicals, as in the case of the UK, gradually began to engage with the issue seriously, including the place of women in mission and leadership exemplified in 1985, which saw the
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formation of the Men, Women and God network by Christian leaders with the support from renowned evangelicals.

Krondorfer (2015, 397–398), nonetheless, observes a sea change in conventional Christian views on masculinity and provides a useful insight in suggesting that contestations about this are now less about doctrinal differences, which had plagued Christian Europe for centuries and increased in pace throughout the twentieth century, and more about moral concerns of lifestyle and the body, including, abortion, marriage, women’s ordination, homosexuality and scientific progress in creating life outside of ‘natural’ reproduction. These concerns, he continues, are not unfamiliar to mainline contemporary churches, and they respond with theological and practical flexibility to changing family and marriage arrangements, to the integration of gay and queer people, to women’s role as spiritual leaders and to gay marriage and ordination.

Masculinities and the spiritual marketplace

From one perspective it might be submitted that the cultural idiom of ‘choice’, which suggests that men are active agents in the position to choose where and how to forge male identities, has arisen in tandem with a spiritual marketplace (Stark and Bainbridge 1985) to cater for specific ‘needs’, be they material, social, psychological or ‘spiritual’. This is a marketplace which has grown with the declining ‘monopoly’ of the Christian churches in Europe and their apparent inability in many cases to offer what the religiously inclined require. New forms of religion, so the theory goes, have arisen as ‘religions of the gaps’ to cater for these needs. Such theorizing, although not without its problems, offers a framework to understand masculinities as expressed and explored through a vast array of fresh and innovating forms of religiosity and spiritualities which seemingly offer solutions for social and psychological deficiencies—and perhaps in a more effective way than the established Christian churches.

The so-called new religions, two decades into the twenty-first century, are now not entirely new. Proliferating from the late 1960s in North America, they also found a measure of popularity in Western Europe. They included new religions such as Nichiren Shoshu, which originated in Japan and offered an innovative expression of Buddhism, and they claimed to offer a form of spirituality which impacted on many dimensions of the individual’s life and to provide an example of spiritual living to others. In a developing spiritual marketplace, some new religious movements (NRMs) offered alternative forms of religion, many forging spirituality with non-traditional forms of gender. Numerous studies from the late 1960s indicated the largely middle-class base and the attraction of the new religions to younger generations of the period (Barker 1984). Their attraction for males, however, was always less than for females, typically at a ratio of 2:1 (Puttick 1999). Some, like the Unification Church, offered a comprehensive lifestyle that sought to restore male dominance within a traditional family structure embracing conventional gender roles. They constituted types of religion which Roy Wallis (1984) called ‘world-rejecting movements’. Wallis correctly predicted the demise of such new religions and the growing popularity of forms which he referred to as ‘world-affirming movements’. Typically, adherents to these movements did not display a membership in any meaningful sense but constituted customers literally buying a ‘service’ such as healing or realizing personal abilities. The scope of these types of religion for exploring masculinities soon became evident, although a core development was that even these rather flimsy forms of organization were to give way to even more individualistic spiritual pursuits, as found in New Age religion.

Without doubt the questioning of male traditional hegemonic institutional forms and spiritual expression has largely come through fresh channels of spirituality typified by New Age religion. However, the term ‘religion’ is problematic in this context because many subscribing
to the New Age movement would not call the New Age a ‘religion’ but rather a ‘spiritual path’, which, in its various idioms and numerous manifestations of holistic philosophies, has seemingly evolved in many cases into a ‘self-spirituality’ (Heelas and Woodhead 2005). In terms of men’s desire to explore differing forms of masculinity, these modes of spirituality emphasised the bypassing of typically male institutional hierarchy associated with conventional Christianity, but this exploration took different trajectories.

**Men’s spirituality groups**

If many of the new religions such as ISKCON and Brahma Kumaris allowed women to investigate innovative roles and to experiment with the new concept of gender and sexual variation, they proved to have a rather limited attraction to men (Puttick 1999). There were alternative attractions, however. From the 1970s, the so-called men’s movement, which did not initially display a great deal in terms of any particular grassroots base, nonetheless spawned their own spiritual groups, and these appeared be linked to identity construction and the exploration of masculinity, faith and spirituality and in such a way as to speak of a ‘contemporary men’s spirituality movement’. Those such as Brothers of the Earth and Radical Faeries proliferated in the USA and filtered through to the Western European context. They appeared to be, in total, largely an entrepreneurial effort where men were brought together in a collective setting for an orchestrated spiritual experience, often in localized circles in Europe. While mostly marginalized, some of the groups that have endured from this period are more akin to support groups, some articulating a spiritual/ritual expression of a newly imagined masculinity in which there is an attempt to ‘get in touch’ with their feminine side. By contrast, other groups were premised on the basis that, although men’s status and roles may be acceptable, individual men were not functioning well psychologically, and they aimed to deal with emotional and social aspects because men had been inadequately socialized into traditional masculine roles (Hunt 2003, 100).

One strand of the men’s spirituality movement manifested itself in the form of neo-paganism, and in Europe this form of spirituality found fertile ground by calling upon ancient forms of religion (although often deflecting the term ‘religion’). The few existing studies of masculinity within paganism proffer one with a unilateral mythopoetic (e.g. imagined and romantic) vision of pagan men as instrumental hunters and providers who honour male deities and prize traditional masculine qualities such as strength, courage, competitiveness and stoicism (Culpepper 1978; York 1995). Paganism marks a search for and even reinvention of ancient spirituality and its accompanying masculinities such as the pre-Christian Nordic group Asatru, whose ‘Nine Noble Virtues’ include courage, truth, honour, fidelity and discipline, running counter to movements reflecting women’s feminist interest in the goddess and witchcraft. Several of these groups took a right-wing direction with those such as Savitri Devi displaying roots in Nazism, and others celebrating satanism and black metal music.

There are further variations in the pagan lexicon. For example, David Green (2012) has explored the male goddess movement (MGM) by emphasizing the sociological dynamics of a number of contemporary pagan men who ritually venerate goddesses. Although they are by no means a unified community of practitioners, within contemporary paganism it marks a new wave of masculinist consciousness which, contrary to mythopoetic constructions of masculinity, seeks to challenge essentialist forms of gender difference. Rejecting both mythopoetic and normative Western social constructions of masculinity, the MGM equates dysfunctional traits such as male aggression and competitiveness with masculinity. The MGM, Green (2012) recognizes, is built around the interiorization of the female antitype, including attributes such as nurturing, as a form of liberation from these dogmas of masculinity.
Queer spiritual places

The emergence of what was once referred to as the gay liberation movement, which emerged from the USA in the late 1960s, impacted upon debates in religious communities around non-heterosexualities in Europe as elsewhere. Such debates overlapped with views of masculinities in various ways. What came to be known as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and intersex (LGBTI) issues disturbed traditional attitudes and overlapped with matters of the ‘feminization’ of the churches. Krondorfer (1996) has explored how religious-ideological viewpoints can be placed on a spectrum in response to such developments. In essence, at one pole, conservative Christians have attempted to resist ‘progressive’ claims that gender is a fluid category which permits humans to explore their sexed and gendered identities. In contrast, liberal theologies and churches conform to these views with a fresh discourse as they traverse a more tolerant path and adopt more tolerant views of gender variation. They insist that this exploration is essentially consistent within a divinely granted liberty to human beings, with theologies developed accordingly. Put otherwise, the religious-ideological spectrum now reaches from fundamentalist-leaning movements that insist on a biblically based, divine order of gender separation/gender complementarity to Christian gay and queer movements calling for a radical reorientation of heteronormative, sex-repressive practices and values.

The challenge for sexual minorities, including gay men, was how to reframe the intersection between religion, gender and sexuality in everyday life, contesting traditional masculine and sexual identities and experiences at the individual and the collective level (Yip and Nynäs 2012). In this context, Browne et al. (2010) draw on rich empirical research across the UK (as well as in Canada and the USA) that investigates the contemporary socio-cultural practices of belief, by those who have historically been excluded or derided by mainstream religions and ‘alternative spiritualities’ such as NRMs and the New Age. These are relatively new emerging innovative spaces and integrative practices of queer spiritualities, ranging from the spirit quests of queer Muslims, to New Age, Quaker, pagan and Buddhist spiritualities allowing explorations of the ‘sexual self’ that interrogate and traverse established gender boundaries. One significance of Browne et al.’s work is the emphasis on crossing cultural borders, including the boundaries of Europe, in such ‘queer spaces’, calling on non-Western faiths and spiritualities in forging safe arenas to explore gender and sexuality. Browne et al. (2010) also emphasize the matter of ‘choice’ that is increasingly playing a vocal role against inequality for LGBTI people at a time when non-heterosexual rights are advancing at pace in European countries. Some gay Christians—males as well as females—have taken a different road by leaving their hostile Christian churches in order to retain their faith (Yip 1999). If they have remained, others are prepared to challenge their churches’ teachings of gender and sexuality, including their scriptural sources (Yip 1997).

Ethnicity and diasporic identities

Moving into another relevant area as part of my examination of the broad picture of religion and masculinities in Europe, it is imperative to consider the impact of ethnicity and nationality. These are variables which can be considered first in terms of immigration, with Europe long being an enticement. There are some 32.5 million foreign citizens living in European Union member states, of which 12.3 million were citizens of another EU member state and the remaining were citizens of countries outside the EU, most notably from Africa and the Middle East. Immigration is changing the religious landscape across Western Europe. For example, immigration has resulted in the percentage of young Muslims in the UK being close to overtaking the percentage of their Christian Anglican counterparts.
Given the significance of immigration, Woodhead (2007, 581) draws attention to the significance of ‘diasporic identities’ in the study of religion and ethnicity, which has loosened an almost exclusive concern with Western religions. This includes expressions such as Pentecostal Christianity that nonetheless have a global reach and may return to the West—Western Europe as well as North America—carried by particular diasporic communities and, in doing so, bringing encultured gender roles and accompanying norms. Such a process is often referred to as ‘reversed mission’ and in the case of Nigerian churches, such as the Redeemed Christian Church of God, have established congregations in Western Europe carrying traditional Christian teachings of male gender roles and authority where pastors are almost exclusively male, supplemented by ethnic beliefs concerning masculinities and male-headed families (Hunt 2001, 111).

Immigration to Western Europe may also bring challenges to traditional masculinities to be found in immigrant faith and ethnic communities. The desire to retain traditional masculinities and the dominant role of males in the family, community and religious life, for example as part of wider Muslim identity (Lewis 2002), may remain central to cultural life. However, Amanullah De Sony (2013) claims that there is a ‘crisis’ in Islamic masculinities. Rigid notions of masculinity, he claims, are causing a crisis in the global Islamic community, especially in Western nations. This crisis is articulated from Qur’anic verses, its commentary, historical precedents and societal, religious and familial obligations. De Sondy notes that Muslims who do not agree with narrow constructs of manliness feel forced to consider themselves as secular and therefore outside the religious community. Through studying Indian-Pakistani Islamic communities, he suggests that the tight constraints on Islamic manhood and the social responsibilities related to them are largely cultural and that these are challenged in the secular environment of Western Europe. For Muslim gay men, the challenges are particularly acute, and while some might embark on their own spiritual quests to reconcile their sexuality and masculinities, they have few ‘sacred places’ to retire to (Yip and Khalid 2010).

Masculinities, religion and national belonging

Much of the preceding overview has focused on Western Europe. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe are clearly religiously differentiated from the West. Each has its own distinctive complex of historical, ethnic, cultural and national background, but most are united by their experience of being previously dominated after World War II by atheist Communist regimes. Compared to Western Europe, the populations of these regions, without wishing to generalize, display higher levels of religiosity. A major Pew Research Center survey, across much of the region, indicates strong belief in God and that the majority of citizens identify with a religion, Orthodox Christianity and Roman Catholicism being the most prevalent religious affiliations. Predictably, historical religions have allowed more traditional views of masculinity to flourish in competition with ‘progressive’ constructs.

Space does not permit a detailed analysis of the nations of Eastern Europe, but Poland may serve as an illustrative example. It is an example which displays contradictions within culturally perceived masculinities. While a number of religious communities operate in Poland, the majority of the country’s population (87.5 percent) identify with Roman Catholicism and view it as the principal repository of Polish heritage and culture. Aune (2010, 54) points out that this could signify a return to patriarchy as a perceived cure for the cultural crisis of masculinity that would seem to be evident in Polish society. But Aune also considers the mythical figure of the Polish Mother, Matka Polka, who embodies a heroic yet thoroughly domesticated
version of femininity. Her main duties revolve around raising and educating the next generation in the spirit of Catholicism and patriotism, as well as displaying inner strength and selfless devotion to others. She fulfils herself through child parenting, ideally through marriage and heterosexual relationships, and is in charge of the household. The Polish folk proverb—‘man is the head of the household but woman is the neck’—implies that male dominance is something of an illusion.

Currently, the rise of so-called popular rightist movements and political parties, which is by no means limited to Eastern Europe since they have been advancing in the West too, has seemingly enhanced the tendency of rediscovering traditional cultural elements. Put simply, the present political climate, emerging in a time of economic insecurities and perceived threats of the so-called migrant crisis, can in simple terms be interpreted as concerned with physical and cultural boundaries which opens the way to re-exploring conventional religiosity. While this might suggest a more conventional form of masculinity, there is the scope for agency to modify conventional expressions. This is made evident in Werner’s (2011) work presenting a micro-analytic sampling of life options of modern men of faith in Scandinavian countries, including their negotiations to accommodate or modify normative nationalist masculine ideals. Roger Friedland (2010) has also observed that, generally speaking, religious nationalism involves more than a defence of male privilege. Rather, it involves both a hostile assault on the effeminization of the collective public body typical of the West and a celebration of its renewed maleness, including commitment to the patriarchal family. Friedland suggests that religious nationalism does not however seek a return to the pre-modern family structure, with its extended networks of kin loyalties (Friedland 2010, 579–580, 582).

Populism and the ‘dissident’ right

What Myers and Miller (2017) refer to as ‘massive masculinity’ denotes what can be seen as a central tenet of the political energy and electoral success on the nationalist right, demonstrating its powerful appeal as populism grows in Western nations. They point out that while it is tempting to interpret this as a return to a more traditional form of hegemonic masculinity, there are elements which are unprecedented. As part of this direction, that variant of the radical right, commonly known as the Alt- (alternative) or ‘Dissident Right’, amounts to a backlash resulting from the confluence of a global economic recession and what is seen as the evils of modernity: liberalism, gender equality, feminism, mass immigration, gay movements and ‘progressive’ reforms, including the gender/queer identity politics movement that is understood to undermine the stability of the gender binary. The major tenets of the Alt-Right are race realism, the reality of ‘natural’ inequalities including that of gender, radical nationalism and aspirations towards the creation of the white ethno-state.

The Alt-Right, however, is a disparate movement with a variety of religious perspectives. Some adherents hope to reconstruct Christianity as a religion for the ‘white race’ that brings a firm morality and hierarchical society with clear gender roles and responsibilities. Many advocates maintain that most forms of contemporary Christianity are corrupt, since they promote a universalistic, egalitarian vision of humanity including gender equality. Some leading figures of the movement are sympathetic with paganism for many of the reasons discussed in the relevant earlier section. Yet others endorse a variation of secularizing trajectories, often adopting an instrumentalist view of religion. It is not a matter of discovering which religion is ‘true’. Rather, religion should be judged by its usefulness in advancing the cause of the white race and eradicating the perceived evils of modernity, including non-conventional forms of femininity and masculinity.
Conclusion

This chapter commenced with the observation that exploring the complexities of religion and masculinities in Europe is no easy endeavour, and for that reason it has necessarily been far-reaching in its subject matter. For matters explored previously, it is possible to concur with David Voas (2009) who has suggested that European religiosity can be characterized as a ‘fuzzy fidelity’ in that it is diffuse and often contradictory, especially given that belief and practice do not necessarily correlate with each other. Moreover, while Europe, by various indices, is understood to be the most secular region in the world, the reality is that religious belief continues to be very important for many Europeans. The major division is between the more secular West and the more religious Central and Eastern Europe, although there are significant variations within each.

As Grace Davie (2013) points out, religion in Western nations is a continually ‘evolving mosaic’. It is no surprise then that it is here in the realm of religion that pluralist notions of masculinity compete against each other for legitimacy. Here, secular ‘progressive’ cultural advances have impacted and challenged traditional Christianity, where the Christian memory is just about intact. High levels of immigration mean that ethnic groups have brought their own constructs around masculinities, yet fresh forms of religion and secularity have often forged their own notions of masculinity and have either endorsed, accommodated or questioned changing gender issues. In Central and Eastern Europe, Christianity is more alive and embedded in tradition. Current governments in states such as Poland and Hungary have spoken of preserving their Christian heritage and conventional family structures. The task of the relevant academic disciplines, then, is to appreciate and map variation in religiosity across the continent in regard to masculinities and grasp the implications resulting from the tapestry of continuity and change.

Notes

1 In fact, Woodhead argues that late capitalism, while breaking from paternalistic modes of masculinity, which dominated the era of the paternalistic state and industrial enterprise and fitted neatly with church-endorsed modes of modern family life, was corrosive of Christian commitment and hence its cultural dominance. She points out that the ‘sacred paternalism’ and emphasis on the gentle virtues of the Christian religion had always displayed an uneasy relationship with forms of hegemonic masculinity centred on sexual and physical prowess, material success, and ‘hardness’ that underpinned gender roles in the traditional family (Woodhead 2007, 580).

2 Elsewhere, Trzebiatowska (2015, 126) explores the evidence that not only is the gap between genders significantly wider in the more secular countries, but it is also greater among those who attend regularly than those who attend irregularly, demonstrating that—contrary to what might be expected—men, where they are involved in religion, are on average more committed and serious about religious practice than women.

3 A conservative Christian movement originating in the USA aiming to advance more traditional Christian views of masculinity and the place of the Christian male in the family unit.

4 A Christian movement in the USA organised for the purpose to mobilize conservative Christian males for marches through a number of US cities.

5 ISKCON (the International Society for Krishna Consciousness) traces its origins to an ancient strand of Hinduism. Brahma Kumaris is a movement which also has origins in Hinduism but with some innovative teachings derived from its founder Dada Lekhraj.


7 The report, Europe’s Young Adults and Religion. Findings from the European Social Survey (2014–16) to inform the 2018 Synod of Bishops, produced by Stephen Bullivant, St Mary’s University, London, 2018.
8 Pew Research Center, ‘Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe’, May 10, 2017, www.pewforum.org/2017/05/10/religious-belief-and-national-belonging-in-central-and-eastern-europe/. There are exceptions. In countries such as the Czech Republic and Estonia many people, when polled, claim they are religious but do not practice their religion in any conventional sense, plausibly reflecting increased social freedoms and individualism.
9 As evident in the census conducted by the Central Statistical Office (GUS). According to the Institute for Catholic Church Statistics, 36.7 percent of Polish Catholic believers attended Sunday church services in 2016.

References


