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## Gender, Agency and Change in Neo-Charismatic Christianity

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## **Gender, Agency and Change in Neo-Charismatic Christianity**

**Tuija Hovi**

The Neo-charismatic Movement is the latest entrant among the revival movements in Finland. It represents Christian fundamentalism emphasising the literally interpreted Bible as the basis for life. Simultaneously, it has certain permissive dimensions that have offered possibilities of spiritual subjectivity for every believer equally. This individualist tendency of Charismatic Christianity works through its experiential dimension with the idea of *charismata*, i.e. the gifts of the Holy Spirit, for instance, speaking in tongues, prophesy or healing. It is typically held that miracles and supernatural healing can be channelled through all believers, not just through preachers as religious specialists. The feature that is also vigorously advocated in the Neocharismatic teaching is the idea of success and prosperity as a special privilege for the true believers.

With regard to the gender issue within the movement, it is notable that the Neo-charismatic Christianity appears to attract virtually as many women as men, despite the fact that the leaders are nearly always men. Nevertheless, in an active congregation, all the members, women as well as men, are encouraged to take on responsibility for the public functions of the community. The reason for this is that all activities are headed towards the eschatological end, “the harvest time,” and every committed member is expected to spread the Word actively and thus convert new believers. However, despite apparent equality in participation, lived religion is always gendered in many ways. In this article, I study gender and the idea of *an agent* in the Neo-charismatic

Movement. In many cases, the role of a Neo-charismatic mediator-subject, for instance a healer or a prophet, seems to ignore the Pauline principles for gender roles, both male and female, even though St. Paul's letters in the Bible are often referred to when speaking of Christian duties.

In the following, I will discuss how religious agency is practiced in this particular tradition and social context, and how it is used for changing the structures of religious tradition. The theme of this article is closely linked to my ongoing research work on the forms and functions of the international Neo-charismatic Movement in Finland. This study is also connected to the project *Post-secular culture and a changing religious landscape in Finland* at Åbo Akademi University (<http://web.abo.fi/fak/hf/relvet/pccr/>). The interviews that I refer to in this article belong to my previous research work, my doctoral dissertation focusing on a single Neo-charismatic congregation, Elämän Sana (Livets Ord) in Turku (Åbo) (Hovi 2007).<sup>1</sup> I am also using information about Neo-charismatic communities that I gathered for the *Religions in Finland Database*<sup>2</sup> in 2008.

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<sup>1</sup> In the end of the 1990's, I interviewed 15 members of the local Word of Life congregation, including the pastor. The interviewees included 9 women and 6 men, aged 20–50 years, and the method was open thematic interview. The actual theme was “living in faith” and conversations proceeded from conversion via issues of membership and religious experiences to visions of the future. At the time of the interviews, the core team of the community had been working in Turku for approximately ten years, and the number of members had risen from 40 to 100. In summer 2008 Word of Life Turku had about 130 members.

<sup>2</sup> The Church Research Institute operates the database *Religions in Finland*. The main purpose of this work is to create a continuously updated digital database and public information service for researching religious communities and studying religious change in Finland. For the time being, the open access database is only in Finnish, but the

## **The Neo-charismatic Movement in Finland**

Since its beginning as the “Azusa Street revival” in 1906, Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity has spread into many branches, and at present, it is the most rapidly expanding form of Christianity in the world. The growth of the movement on a global scale can be seen as a result of the diverse nature of its doctrine and functions as well as its adaptability in the face of new situations and cultural environments (Anderson 2004.) In the Finnish religious field, Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity has had an effect almost for a hundred years. The first influence of this revival was brought into the country already before the time of its independence. In 1911 the Azusa Street influenced Methodist pastor Thomas Ball Barratt (1862/1865–1940), who introduced Pentecostalism to Europe while working in Norway, visited several towns in Finland (Anderson 2006: 96). Soon after the visit quite a few Pentecostal communities began to work locally, the first one was located in Helsinki (Helsingfors).

Today classical Pentecostalism has spread all over the country, and in 2002 it received an official status as an established church. However, all the old congregations have not been willing to join the church, fearing the loss of their independence as local lay congregations. Due to this fear, the number of members in the Pentecostal Church of Finland is only around 5500, while in all, there are approximately 45000 Pentecostals in the country. Classical Pentecostalism is inclined to withdraw from the later Neo-charismatic revival that has a somewhat different doctrinal and functional emphasis.

The history of the Neo-charismatic Movement in Finland has taken new directions since the turn of this century. It is notable that the

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introduction to the database can be accessed in English (see <http://www.uskonnot.fi/english>).

number of local Neo-charismatic communities of the “third wave” Charismatic revival has drastically risen in Finland during the period beginning from the 1990’s up to the present. The movement mainly operates in urban settings as independent, small congregations; the densest network of these new communities is situated in the capital city area. The forms of the movement that seem to have the most important influence are the Toronto Blessing, the Vineyard and the Faith Movement, but other branches, such as the River, the New Wine and the Father’s Heart, have also gained supporters on the Finnish Neo-charismatic scene.

The Neo-charismatic Movement is often stamped as Prosperity Theology or Health and Wealth Gospel, terms with a negative connotation, and its modern and diverse functions are often criticised, for instance, by the representatives of classical Pentecostalism in Finland because of the pronounced emphasis on supernatural healing and the teaching concerning economic issues in sermons. Despite this, new Pentecostal congregations founded by young adults after the year 2000 are strongly inspired by the Neo-charismatic Movement, for instance by emphasising lively praising music in the meetings and using more equal division of labour between men and women in the community. In these cases, the borderline between traditional Pentecostalism and modern Neo-charismatic Christianity is becoming vaguer. Charismatic activities and events within the Evangelical-Lutheran Church have also collected a remarkable amount of participants compared to regular Sunday services<sup>3</sup>, but in this article, I

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<sup>3</sup> Altogether 79.7% of approximately 5 million inhabitants are official members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, even though only roughly 3% of them are active church-goers (KT 31.12.2009; Kääriäinen & al. 2008: 9). In this sense, the situation in Finland is very similar to the one in the neighbouring Scandinavian countries, Sweden and Norway.

exclude the charismatic activities within the mainline church and focus on the nondenominational field.

In seemingly Evangelical-Lutheran but rather secularized Finland of approximately five million inhabitants, the Neo-charismatic Movement is a minority religion. The active and committed members of local independent congregations are approximately 4000. The number of supporters who are loosely connected to the movement and are influenced by it in one way or another is naturally much bigger. For instance, big happenings arranged by organizations of travelling evangelists often appeal to those who are not actively involved in any particular congregation. However, precise numbers are difficult to give because these communities do not necessarily register their members, not to mention keeping a record of occasional participants. Several pastors, whom I talked to, could only give rough estimates. Only a few of them knew precisely how many active members they have in their congregations – these were the smallest of the communities. It is also notable that definitions of membership are not consistent within the Neo-charismatic field. Nevertheless, the visibly functioning fundamentalist movement has settled in the country as a critical alternative to both the established church and secularization in all its implications.

After this short introduction of the Neo-charismatic Movement in Finland I move forward to discuss the actual topic of this article. To gain an understanding of gendered agency as somewhat different in the Neo-charismatic communities from what it has traditionally been in the preceding Pentecostal tradition, it is also useful to take a glance at some survey results of the relationship between sex, gender roles and religion.

### **Sex and roles in religious life**

Several researchers – sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists – have demonstrated that women participate in religious activities more frequently than men. This situation has been explained principally in

two ways. First, women are seen to be more religious because of their different structural location in society, and gender differences in religiosity reflect the fundamental division of labour by sex. Second, men are claimed to be less religious than women because of their differential socialization and their sex-type personalities. This interpretation implies the assumption that once formed, the gendered personality directs person's behaviour throughout the life (Thompson 1991: 382).

Along with these two broadly adopted interpretations, some have opened up the discussion on whether differences may be attributable to gender orientation (i.e. being feminine or masculine) rather than sex (i.e. being female or male). For instance, sociologist Edward Thompson's (1991) results have indicated that sex differences in religious participation might particularly reflect men's and women's socialization into traditional roles. In these roles, men are heavily socialized to be competent in the workplace using professional skills outside of the home and women are socialized to be in a relationship and to take on the role as a caregiver. Furthermore, Thompson takes it as a starting point that religion is a "feminine institution,"<sup>4</sup> and due to this, gender orientation affects one's religiosity more than one's sex (Thompson 1991: 382).

Traditional gender roles and orientations have been understood as two opposite ways of defining oneself in relation to the world. The masculine role has been seen synonymous with "a dominant, instrumental style associated with self-esteem and personal well-being," whereas traditional feminine role is typically viewed as nurturing,

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<sup>4</sup> Referring to the data he collected among undergraduate students, Thompson claims that religiousness is influenced more by a "feminine" outlook on life than by being female, and being religious is a consonant experience for people with a feminine orientation.

expressive, and focused on the support and well-being of others. Psychologist David Simpson and his colleagues summarize this by saying that feminine social orientation focuses on connecting with others, while the masculine role tends to focus on achievement and power (Simpson & al. 2008: 42). Accordingly, the result following Thompson's findings may be that traditionally socialized women would therefore tend to be drawn to religious activities while traditionally socialized men would tend to avoid religious activities. Men are socialized to avoid feminine activities and thus avoid religious or spiritual experiences to escape the appearance of being feminine (Simpson & al. 2008: 43).

Furthermore, the emotion thesis argues that women are more emotionally involved in their faith and more apt to explore the meanings of their expression. This may be understood when more women than men define their faith as a relationship with God, while men tend to define their faith rather as a set of beliefs (Simpson & al. 2008: 42). However, cognitive and emotional factors in religiousness are also socially and culturally learned (Simpson & al. 2008: 45). This is especially so in a tradition with a strong emphasis on personal religious or spiritual experience and the need for sharing the experience collectively, hence, cognitive and emotional factors are internalized as appropriate role models for a true believer. Generally speaking, this is obvious in Charismatic Christianity where the tradition of witnessing, telling about one's relationship with God in public, is a ritualised practice (e.g. Hovi 2004).

By applying scales measuring spiritual well-being and religious orientation, Simpson's research group drew the inference that there were no significant differences between men's and women's religiosity on any variables after all (Simpson & al. 2008: 47). The results showed that feminine characteristics, (such as affection, understanding, sensitivity to others), masculine traits (such as independence, assertiveness, ambition), or an identity as male or female appear to have little impact on a person's capacity for being aware of his or her relationship to a



higher power or one's sense of religious well-being (Simpson & al. 2008: 50). According to the conclusion of this survey, gender and sex differences in the light of the psychology of religion are not as clear as previously proposed. Thus, either sex or gender orientation alone do not explain religious activity sufficiently (Simpson & al. 2008: 51).

Correspondingly, Paul Kennedy and Malcolm Reid (2009) have recently come to a very similar conclusion in their survey within a local congregational setting. Their material consists of personal narratives among a sample of men and women identified as Christian exemplars by leaders within their respective congregations. Kennedy and Reid point out that while a few important and statistically significant differences were found between men and women, there was far more similarity than difference. Most of the variables they examined showed no statistically significant difference between women and men (Kennedy & Reid 2009: 111). This outcome seems to fit rather well with the active adherents of the Neo-charismatic congregations, too. The principled unisex tendency of Charismatic Christian spirituality works through its strong experiential emphasis with the gender-neutral idea of charismata. Traditional gender roles may thus be accommodated to different situations of present day life.

### **The twofold agency**

The active and visible roles in a religious community are typically combined with the tendency of changing the tradition in one way or another. When human behaviour as performing actions in order to create a new state of affairs has been explained by using the idea of agency, the concept has been given two different meanings. First, it is used in the meaning of *a representant* when a controlling outsider is an essential initiator in the action. Second, the term 'an agent' refers often to the role of *an independent actor* that aims to achieve something on one's own conditions. Both of these two interpretations of agency have been used in studies of gendered religious behaviour.

The instrumental idea of agency, as it was presented by social

psychologist Stanley Milgram, deals with a person working as a mediator for a higher authority without control of his or her own. According to Milgram's theory, individuals can act either in an autonomous state or in an agentic state. In an autonomous state, as independent actors, individuals make decisions based on their own ideas, beliefs and experiences. Conversely, in an agentic state they give up their own responsibility, deferring to those of higher status – as merely their representative agents. (Milgram 1974: 133.)

The basic idea of obedience to authority that Milgram tested in an arranged laboratory situation<sup>5</sup>, can also be applied to a more symbolic relationship in religious everyday life. By this, I mean the relationship between religious believers and what they regard as an abstract “foreman”, the supernatural controlling power above them. Working for a higher authority justifies one's actions. Thus, agency in the role of an obedient mediator may also legitimize personal choices and the wish to stand out in a community of believers. Channelling supernaturally authorized power is also grounds for the idea of possession which works as well in the Pentecostal idea of charismata (cf. Keller 2002). It obviously justifies public actions of the subordinate. For instance, the historian Amy Hollywood has used this approach to the medieval Christian female mystics. She explains that women legitimized their textual productions by the terms of divine agency and authority in times when women were not supposed nor allowed to express religious interpretations in public. Medieval female mystics made use of their gender subordination as the source of their agency that was not attri-

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<sup>5</sup> Milgram's test was heavily criticized for its unethical arrangements. Nevertheless, a replication of Milgram's research was carried out 45 years later. This time ethical issues were consciously addressed of and more weight was put on the diversity of participants. As a result, the outcome was very similar to that of Milgram's earlier research. Differences between men's and women's obedience were also minimal (Burger 2009).

buted to the religious women themselves but to God (Hollywood 2004).

As independently acting agents, individuals exercise control over events and affect their own lives. However, agency is not practiced in a cultural vacuum but is enacted within specific social contexts. Social psychologist Albert Bandura has defined human agency in interactional terms as emerging from reciprocal causation. Through social cognition, agency refers to self-efficacy beliefs, capacity of forethought and intentionality (Bandura 2001). Furthermore, the personal and social structure perspective in social psychology explains agency as the capacity for intentional and willful behavior in spite of social structural obstacles (Côté & Levine 2002). Such social structural obstacles, such as a conservative or repressive religious tradition, may actually inspire agentic actions in processes of identity formation, subjectivity and cultural structuration (cf. Mahmood 2006).

Speaking specifically of religious agency, the sociologist Laura Leming defines it as the capacity for human beings to make choices and to impose those choices on the world. It is a personal and collective claiming and enacting of dynamic religious identity. She says that when religious agency is operative, religion is performed as well as practiced; it is consciously, rather than repetitively as a routine, enacted (Leming 2007: 74). Leming finds the dimension of social learning in the question how an individual becomes agentic. She argues that agency is produced through personal choices and motivation inspired by the learned tradition (Leming 2007: 79).

Leming's idea of religious agency is comparable with the explanation given by social-psychological role theory; taking the role of an agent in the context of a religious tradition is actually repeating the mythic interaction between the believer's role and its counter-role, the role of God. Social learning theory, including role theory, leans on perception, motivation and learning. In his application of role theory the psychologist of religion Hjalmar Sundén, and later on his followers, have explained different religious experiences as the results of such

learning processes (Hood & al. 1996: 190, 203). From this standpoint, occupying the role of a religious agent is thus understood as being in relation to traditional role models, either accepting them as such or trying to modify them. What makes religious experience and behaviour interesting in this perspective is that occupying a role does not occur mechanically repeating readymade mythic models, but rather by varying, selecting and combining contextually suitable pieces of them. Roles may also be flexible on a case by case basis.

As a role, religious agency can be constructed through various ways by which an individual aims at acting in relationship to God as the controlling power. The strategies of agency that Leming finds relevant in her own study of woman-conscious Catholic women are *gaining voices or vocation, creating space* and *using flexible alignment*. By studying these interactive and situated strategies in the speech of her interviewees she has studied how Catholic women are consciously trying to change and update their religion instead of leaving it even though it is doctrinally too restrictive and conservative for them. Through their courses of action, the Catholic women engage in regenerating their religion (Leming 2007: 88). In this sense, they create and maintain religiously meaningful practices of their own and reform the traditional gendered norms by means of their subjectivity.

Psychologist Elizabeth Weiss Ozorak (1996) also outlined women's strategies of coping within patriarchal religious traditions in her well known article about women's empowerment through religion. Most women in her study perceived subordination and inequalities in their religious communities but coped with them by *cognitive restructuring*, i.e. translating and reinterpreting or using both strategies as integration (Ozorak 1996: 19).<sup>6</sup> From this standpoint, a central aspect of

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<sup>6</sup> Ozorak avoids using the term 'cognitive *dissonance*' that rather refers to fallacious interpretation of an anticipated situation (cf. Festinger & al. 1956).

agency is a believer's interpretation of it which is constructed rhetorically as a role of an obedient mediator between the supernatural power and human life. This kind of interpreter's position is visible in Leming's work, too. She reports that one of her interviewees explicitly understands herself to be *an instrument* of change (Leming 2007: 79).

The social psychological ways of understanding religious agency in a religious context that I have brought up here are twofold. On the one hand, believers identify themselves as obedient servants of God, the believed-in supernatural authority; on the other hand, they use the disguise of spiritual obedience to present themselves as active subjects (a subject understood as the autonomously thinking and acting self).

1. agency as being an intermediary, a realiser, a representant: rhetorically disclaiming subjectivity, "working as a tool of God"
2. agency as being a subject, an actor, a decision-maker: implicitly emphasising subjectivity, "using Christian authority as an autonomous individual"

The agentic functions in a religious context emerge from the mythic relationship between human beings and the controlling power above them, the transcendent other as authority. Both models of agency that I have summarized in the table above seem to be intertwined in producing the Neo-charismatic agency for both men and women. Their strategies of religious agency are the transfer of liability combined with the role of an obedient realiser, and the emphasis of true believers' right to their autonomy and decision-making being authorized by God.

### **Biblical fundamentalist gender roles and Neo-charismatic agency**

The psychologist of religion Ralph Hood argues that from a psychological perspective, fundamentalism can best be thought of as a

religious meaning system that relies exclusively upon a sacred text (Hood 2005: 6, 9). Christian fundamentalists are likely to locate the justification and motives for their actions within the Bible. Typically this tendency is manifested in traditional gender roles, too. However, the interpretations of Biblical norms are dependent on those historical, cultural and social contexts where they are used. Even if separation from the world<sup>7</sup> at the level of lifestyle and world view is obvious in the Neo-charismatic Movement, there is also active outbound attempt to make changes within the world through missionary work and evangelizing. This mission is understood as a duty for every believer, men and women equally.

The doctrinal unisex tendency of Charismatic Christianity works through its strong experiential emphasis with the idea of *charismata*. In my study of the Neo-charismatic Word of Life community, I regarded personal narratives concerning the experiences of *charismata* in the interviews as verbal constructions of agency in believers' everyday lives (Hovi 2007). The systematically taught doctrine of the movement tunes up strongly personal stories of the adherents' experiences. In order to legitimate their own interpretations, decisions and actions, believers lean upon the Bible and teachings in the Bible school.

The idea of *charismata* is closely connected with the idea of active religious agency, both masculine and feminine, explained as particularly being a tool of a higher authority. However, even though *charismata* offer access to religious virtuosity to both sexes equally, sex and gender roles are not obliterated in Neo-charismatic Christianity. On the contrary, both men and women are encouraged to keep up their

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<sup>7</sup> According to Nancy Ammerman, separation from the world is the key tenet which draws the line between the fundamentalist community and their surroundings. A personal morality that forbids drinking, dancing and divorce are visible characteristics of their lifestyle (Ammerman 1987: 3–4).

heterosexual characteristics which are regarded as religiously motivated roles. As a matter of fact, there is a strict demand for heteronormative social structures that include above all marriage and nuclear family. In the Neo-charismatic doctrine, and in fundamentalist Christianity at large, home and family are regarded as Christian institutions which are based on the biblical roles for women and men.

Still, even though the traditional role models are strictly defined in the Neo-charismatic Movement, gender orientation, as understood above, may be mixed or androgynous through the idea of charismata in religious life. It is mixed or androgynous in the sense that the anticipated gender orientations can be questioned or neutralized through an individual's experience of being in contact with God, the supernatural power. Referring to the conventional assumption of sex or gender affecting individual's religious experience discussed above, Edward Thompson has pointed out that it is possible to have the causal direction the other way around. He argues that it is probable that religious experience affects gender perspective in some way, and thus religious affiliation and socialization might influence explaining the within-gender variations in religiousness (Thompson 1991: 391). Neo-charismatic Christianity offers an example of this influence in the forms of religious agency and partnership in division of congregational labour, especially in evangelizing, that is, spreading the Word.

### *Rhetorical asexuality and cognitive restructuring*

In response to questions about the meaning of gender in relation to the roles in the Word of Life congregation, the interviewees answered repeatedly by referring to St. Paul's idea: "In Christ, there is no man, nor a woman" (Gal 3:28). This principle was essential in the teaching of W.J. Seymore, the early Pentecostalist preacher of the Azusa Street Revival in the beginning of the last century. He regarded sex as an irrelevant matter for an individual's spiritual development (Cox 1995: 48–49). Later on, through the organizational processes of the move-

ment, this point of view has often been reversed or placed in the background, and hierarchy between sexes has rather been understood as “God’s will.” This attitudinal transformation in revival movements is typical during the processes of organizing the movement. As a result, in a hierarchical religious community, questions of sex and gender are often deliberately ignored. Similarly, those who are in an inferior position finally prefer to concentrate on less unequal aspects in a tradition, or doctrinal principles are explained as concerning “all human beings” at a very general level (Ozorak 1996: 23).

As has been documented in the history of many religious movements, when a movement becomes organized, the hierarchy between sexes is gradually legitimised by creating a doctrinal explanation for it. This was also the case in the organizing phase of the Finnish Pentecostal Movement. After the early expansive period of active female evangelists in the 1930s, charismata became understood as gender-bound capacity. Thus, the question of charismata became simultaneously a question of leadership (Helander 1987: 199). As a consequence, a servant’s role was assigned for women as an inborn duty, and praising women as good servants actually became a means to oppress them. Some female evangelists accepted this role and accordingly called themselves “Lord’s little helpers” (Helander 1987: 200; cf. Lawless 1988). The third wave of Neo-charismatic Christianity has returned to the starting block of early Pentecostalism by questioning this normative spiritual subservience and by giving alternative role models for both sexes without contesting the tradition itself. Speaking of which, the humble servant’s role is not impossible for Neo-charismatic male pastors, either. For example, the founder of the Word of Life congregation in Turku described himself to me as “God’s errand boy” in an interview situation.

Theoretically, the emphasis on personal and individual spiritual experience makes sex or gender an irrelevant question. I call this ideal principle of the Neo-charismatic Movement *rhetorical asexuality*. Doctrinally, the precondition for achieving charismata is not one’s sex



but one's personal spiritual development. The very same tendency has been visible in several religious traditions throughout history, especially in those emphasising mystical paths. Furthermore, in Charismatic Christian tradition, the crucial turning point in an individual's life, i.e. a conversion, is regarded as an asexual process, too, and is understood to be produced purely by supernatural means. It is taken for granted that even evidently social factors having an impact on the conversion process, such as the role of religious friends as significant others are explained as having been arranged in one way or another by God.

The so-called gender-neutral "Christian's authority" as a result of a conversion and fundamentalist Christian lifestyle is the undisputable legitimisation for acting in a community of believers. The typical forms of function in the Neo-charismatic congregations like evangelizing teams, cells and prayer groups require members to take responsibility of small scale leadership instead of merely following pastors. Emphasising the importance of the personal religious experience, for both men and women, equalises the believers' statuses in the movement, at least on the rhetorical level. I stress the word 'rhetorical' and the public level, because in practice – or in lived religion – this principle of asexuality is in one way or another accommodated to the traditional heterosexual gender roles.

Sociologist Linda Woodhead has argued that a reason for Charismatic Christianity appealing to both sexes equally, may be the way in which Charismatic Christianity affirms the pre-eminent value of the family and of the mother's role within it and "tames men by affirming the womanly values of care, love and responsibility" (Woodhead 2002a: 175). I would like to add to Woodhead's suggestion that it is particularly noteworthy that care, love and responsibility are not regarded as merely domestic womanly values within a community of Word of Life believers whom I interviewed. The higher position a person holds, the more he or she is expected to express these spiritual virtues towards others, whether the virtues are regarded as feminine or not.

As Nancy Ammerman has pointed out, the culture of a fundamentalist Christian congregation establishes but one family structure – the nuclear family – as normative, and the dominant life experience in the group reinforces that rule (Ammerman 1987: 135). The traditionally lower social status of women in fundamentalist communities has been explained in many Christian movements by citing St. Paul again when he commands women to be silent in the congregation and accept being under men's rule (e.g. 1 Cor 11:10; Eph 5:22). Nevertheless, in Neo-charismatic communities, this rule appears to be surprisingly peripheral. It may result from the fact that these communities are often founded by young adults who, at least in the Nordic countries, have not taken for granted this conservative arrangement as such. In Neo-charismatic communities, women claim to be equal to men in the sense of appealing to the ideal of rhetorical asexuality which refers to the identical spiritual capacity, but women are meant to be engaged with other tasks than men. Thus, there is an ongoing search for the balance between rhetoric of equality, traditional hierarchy, and attitudes that guide everyday life in both public and private spheres.

In principle, the traditional structure of the hierarchy is God > man > woman. However, as Woodhead has noted, whilst women give formal acknowledgement to male authority in the home, in practice they may exercise considerable power over men. In the teachings of the movement, men are encouraged to respect and cherish their wives and their home, and to honour Christian values of love, faithfulness, etc. All of this can be turned to the woman's advantage (Woodhead 2002b: 337). Borrowing Ozorak's term *cognitive restructuring* (see p. 48) here, women's interpretations of their position can be seen as accepting it on their own conditions. Thus, my female interviewees gave a creative interpretation to the Pauline principle of the hierarchy of the sexes. They referred to the idea that a man is the head of the family, but simultaneously, they reminded me that a woman is like the neck that turns the head. Strangely enough, my male interviewees

were not particularly inclined to discuss this matter. They simply saw their position as being equal to women in everything. Women had more to say about their roles, and they constructed their agency in many situations related to men in manipulative terms.

### *Leaders and partners*

Discussions with members of a congregation revealed cases of applications and variations on how the traditional roles that have been used as legitimating the traditional hierarchy between the sexes are in practice interpreted anew. As I stressed earlier, almost as many men as women commit themselves to the Neo-charismatic Movement. It appears to attract both sexes, despite the fact that the highest leadership in a congregation is practically always reserved for men. According to Woodhead, one explanation may be that, despite the exclusion, Charismatic Christianity offers empowerment in ways that matter most to both sexes and in practice opens up other roles to considerable responsibility for women, too (Woodhead 2002a: 175). This is due to the gift of the Holy Spirit that is meant to be equal for every believer. The consequences of this gift, such as acts of healing and prophecy, give a collectively meaningful status to a person – man or woman – who is able and willing to use those gifts for mutual benefit. In the context of the Charismatic tradition, religious virtuosity is attainable to everyone.

To a certain extent, the gender roles work traditionally at the official level in the movement. For instance, it is a norm in a Neo-charismatic congregation that the pastor is a *married* man. In consequence, men and women are supposed to work for the congregation together as couples, and this principle is made very much visible in the public image of the movement. Typically, smiling faces of a leading couple often welcome a visitor on the websites of Neo-charismatic congregations. Interviewees verbalized strict guidelines for the division of labour: a pastor is the leader of the congregation and his wife has the duty of supporting him in this task. Even so, surprisingly often

wives are also called ‘pastors’ and are actively involved, for example, in teaching, team leadership, and so forth. This is a striking difference compared to traditional Pentecostalist congregations where wives of pastors are publically invisible in their supporting role, and only brothers are amongst the Elders on the board. In Neo-charismatic communities, it is quite common that the executive group of a congregation is a team of a few married couples who divide areas of responsibility.

Positioning a man as the leader of a Neo-charismatic congregation is the norm, but a flexible one. In some cases, female pastors as leaders are present in the situations “when there is no suitable man for that job”. For instance, a pastor’s marital status is regarded as an important criterion – single men may not be efficient enough without the support of wives. This argument indicates a relatively important role of women in congregational life. Women also work successfully as evangelists.<sup>8</sup> Among the task of a pastor and an evangelist, there are several other public roles in the Neo-charismatic field that can be occupied by women. For instance, women are often seen as assistant pastors sharing the work with the leader of a congregation or organizers of prayer groups or leaders and members of performing praising groups. Singing or playing in the praising group means standing out visibly in the congregation, because of the important role of music and dancing in the meetings.

Thus, the Neo-charismatic Movement has made the line between the private and the public vaguer for traditional gender roles compared to other fundamentalist and conservative Christian branches (Woodhead 2002b). Larger congregations arrange courses about themes relating to the private sphere of life, such as heterosexual re-

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<sup>8</sup> Pastors are leaders of congregations and evangelists are itinerant preachers.

relationships, marriage and family, as well as themes belonging to public work, like “equipping” (i.e. coaching for missionary work) and leadership training. All of the schooling listed above is open to both sexes. ‘Partnership’, women and men working together, is the concept that is actively propagated in congregational life. Rhetorical asexuality also seems to give more space to the gender roles in this respect.

Whether the Neo-charismatic Movement is “taming” men, as Woodhead has put it, by favouring feminine gender roles and orientations or not, is not the point, I think. I would rather talk about stretching the borders of traditional gender roles. A theme that is currently a topical issue in the movement is the idea of *men’s emancipation*. In my opinion, it could be called “Neo-charismatic man consciousness” as a counterpart of agency producing woman consciousness, for instance, among the case of the Catholic women whom Leming has studied. According to an article published on the website of a local Finnish City Church congregation, men’s emancipation is defined as being “consciously the head of the family”. This means being committed to the family, taking responsible for one’s own spiritual development, solving the problems, serving one’s wife in a loving way and respecting one’s children by spending enough time with them. Considering what I discussed above about care, love and responsibility as gendered qualities, Charismatic men’s emancipation seems to give more room, at least to younger men, to act in various roles and this actually broadens the idea of being a biblical leader. The Finnish Christian men’s magazine *Tosimies* (The Real Man) strongly advocates the same values (Tiittanen 2008).

It seems that Neo-charismatic Christianity offers some ways for men, or even leads them to develop the feminine sides of their gender perspective if, for instance, taking responsibility of one’s family is regarded as feminine orientation (cf. Thompson 1991: 390). On the other hand, women are also expected to stand out and work visibly and even aggressively for the shared spiritual goal.

## **Conclusions**

There is no such thing as a static religion. Even a fundamentalist movement that claims to represent the “original” idea of Christianity is an ongoing process of innovations, new interpretations and cultural accommodations in different historical contexts. As a form of conservative Christianity, the Neo-charismatic Movement also holds to the biblical norms but simultaneously opens up new ways of interpreting them in today’s diverse, postmodern society. Compared to established classical Pentecostalism, the Neo-charismatic Movement contains a variety of lifestyles and there are also doctrinal differences between various communities due to the lack of a centralized institution.

In his recent article, the sociologist of religion Pål Repstad has articulated different strategies for legitimating religious and moral changes to the Christian organizations with a conservative self-understanding. Taking the Neo-charismatic Movement as an example, new forms of functions are often explained by the idea that “the Spirit may lead to new places” (cf. Repstad 2008: 26). This explanation is easily linked to the gendered idea of agency; acting as an obedient servant and an authorized mediator of the supernatural power legitimizes interpretations and changes that may otherwise be too radical for the tradition. The new division of gendered labour in a congregation is an example of it.

Going back to Leming’s ideas regarding change within a religious tradition, it is crucial to understand the micro-processes of how change takes place. The concept of individual agency works as a lens which helps to break down the monolithic perception of religious tradition as a static structure (Leming 2007: 74). It seems that the Neo-charismatic Movement appeals to the people who are, in principal, willing to commit themselves to fundamentalist Christian values but who want to apply and interpret those values in a modern way, not separating themselves from the world but, instead, trying to change it. They seem to have projective “capacity of agency” applying the resources of a certain religious tradition for their own benefit

(Leming 2007: 80; cf. Sewell 1992: 19; Emirbayer & Mishce 1998: 984).

Even though at the doctrinal level, sex or gender is an irrelevant factor for one's personal spirituality, it is a directive property in an individual's religious behaviour and thinking. Lived religion is basically gendered. It is constituted contextually and bodily and thus, it is inseparable from social life. In this perspective, religious language is an act whose meaning will differ depending on the context, agents and agendas involved (e.g. Svalastog 2009: 1). Charismatic Christianity with its ideal principle of asexual religious experience is an interesting field for studying the relationships between sex, gender and religion. Rhetorical asexuality is the concept that I suggest in this perspective as a counterpart for visible role behaviour in lived religion. By leaning on rhetorical asexuality the adherents of Neo-charismatic Movement may explain that gender differences are meaningless for an individual's spiritual experience. As a consequence, gender difference is interpreted as a minor factor in important congregational actions in an apparently strictly heteronormative community. Visible roles as teachers, evangelists, team leaders or campaign organizers, not to mention the roles of charismatic prophets or healers, can thus be occupied by both men and women. The individual, personal and thus uncontested experience of encountering the Holy Spirit is understood to be free from gendered limitations.

In the Neo-charismatic Movement, gender-oriented agency is not only women's means for being spiritually active. It also constitutes a way for men to reinterpret and talk about their masculine agent role in new terms. The Neo-charismatic Movement gives examples of interpreting normative rhetorical asexuality and using cognitive restructuring for gender roles in lived religion. It is a version of Christian fundamentalism adjusted to Nordic post-secular culture.

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