

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Why are Women More Religious than Men?*

Why are Women More Religious than Men? by Marta Trzebiatowska and Steve Bruce,
Oxford University Press

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In a book titled with their main question, sociologists Trzebiatowska and Bruce ask *Why are Women More Religious than Men?* Gender differences in religiosity are one of the most consistent findings in the sociology of religion, and a large body of research has explored this phenomenon. The literature remains divided, however, about why women are more religious than men, with some arguing that these gender differences are social in origin and others arguing that they are biological in origin.

For readers unfamiliar with the literature, Trzebiatowska and Bruce start their book by demonstrating that there is a gender gap in religiosity, focusing primarily on Western Christianity: women self-identify as more religious, are more likely to affiliate with a religion, and are more active in their religion. The authors briefly mention non-Christians in Christian nations (two pages) and cross-cultural variation (one paragraph) in the first chapter, but the book primarily engages gender gaps in Christian religiosity in Christian nations.

Having noted the widespread gender gap in (at least) Christian religiosity and spirituality, Trzebiatowska and Bruce assess the different theories that have been explored, and come down solidly on the side of social explanations: they come to this conclusion because, as they state, biological arguments rely on faulty gender assumptions and insufficient, contested evidence. In brief, they assert that historical processes made Christianity more the domain of women, and that the current gender gap in religiosity is attributable to momentum from the historical gendering of Christianity.

Trzebiatowska and Bruce argue that Western Christianity in the modern era became gendered because men were influenced by secularization before women, attributing the differential influence of secularization to the different social roles women and men played in Western societies. In other words, in a context of “separate spheres” secularization made men less religious because they were more exposed to new ideas that undermined religious belief. Women, on the other hand, in part due to gendered social roles (e.g., motherhood and homemaking), were

less exposed to such secularizing ideas, and so religion remained important in their lives. Furthermore, according to the authors, there is a general snowballing effect, such that what began as a small gender difference in an institution tends to accumulate over time. For instance, if a congregation is made up of more women than men, the women may begin to feel more comfortable there and the men less comfortable: increasingly large proportions of women will therefore join, and increasingly large proportions of men will disaffiliate, creating a positive feedback loop. The authors argue that Christianity became a gendered religion, and therefore is now substantially more appealing to women than men. Trzebiatowska and Bruce’s “time lag” thesis then culminates in their prediction that the gender gap will shrink in nations that become increasingly secular and gender equal. More specifically, as women fill social roles more similar to those of men, secularization will more quickly influence women, and they, too, will become less religious.

The book’s topic is important, and the main idea about historical gendering processes is fascinating. Trzebiatowska and Bruce provide a breath of fresh air in a literature that has all too often focused on biological explanations, either promoting them or refuting them without providing alternative explanations. This book goes beyond showing why biological explanations are wrong by seeking to provide another explanation. Some of the authors’ key ideas, however, did not have extensive empirical support. Do people really perceive Christianity as more feminine and less masculine? Maybe, but we do not know for sure. Does a nation becoming more secular actually cause the gender gap in religiosity to shrink? Maybe, but without empirical evidence it is only a hypothesis that still needs to be tested.

As compelling as the ideas in this book are, they remain speculative and Christianity-specific: the authors generally fail to provide solid empirical evidence for their claims, and they do not seriously consider non-Christian contexts. They do allude to other research that makes similar arguments, but the works they cite also lack, as far as I could tell, explicit empirical tests of the key arguments of the book: (1) religion, especially Christianity, is perceived as more feminine than masculine, (2) gendering processes therefore explain gender differences in religiosity, and (3) continuing secularization and growing

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gender equality will eventually cause gender differences in (Christian) religiosity to abate. More attention should have been paid to whether the “time lag” thesis would extend to other societies: if so, as Muslim countries with traditional gender roles undergo early stages of secularization they should demonstrate rising gender gaps in religiosity as men’s religiosity is undermined more quickly than women’s religiosity.

Not all books need to be based on original data or cover all social groups, but this book would have spoken more effectively to the question of why women are more religious than men had it contained evidence to support the key arguments and serious considerations of non-Christian societies. The authors could have examined various types of data to test their claims. First, they could have conducted survey research or, better yet, experimental survey research on whether different religions, or people who identify with different religions, are viewed as more or less feminine or masculine. Second, they could have tested whether proxies for gendering processes, such as self-reported sympathy, mediate the relationship between gender and religiosity. Alternatively, they could have collected new interview or survey data about whether women feel more social pressure than men to be religious. Third, and in my opinion most importantly, the authors could have used already-available cross-national

data, such as the World Values Survey, to examine whether gender differences in religiosity shrink with further secularization and/or increasing gender equality. Finally, to have considered whether the “time lag” theory applies beyond Christian societies, the authors could have examined whether Muslim societies experiencing early stages of secularization demonstrate a growing gender gap in religiosity.

In sum, I found the book to be a contribution to the literature, but more as a set up for future work than an evidence-based answer to the title’s question: *Why are Women More Religious than Men?* In fact, the authors themselves admit that they have not really answered their question when they say that much of their study was “deliberately inconclusive” (p. 177). The book is hardly groundbreaking nor is it a final statement in the literature, and I suspect it may not be a gripping read for people not already interested in the gender differences in religiosity debate. Regardless of its limitations, the book set forth fascinating arguments to explain gender gaps in religiosity. Future research should test whether the evidence supports Trzebiatowska and Bruce’s compelling “time lag” hypothesis.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

How to cite this article: Schnabel, L 2015 Review of *Why are Women More Religious than Men?* *Secularism and Nonreligion*, 4: 7, pp. 1–2, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/snr.az>

Published: 12 August 2015

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