

# Book Review: Why Are Women More Religious Than Men?

by Blog Admin

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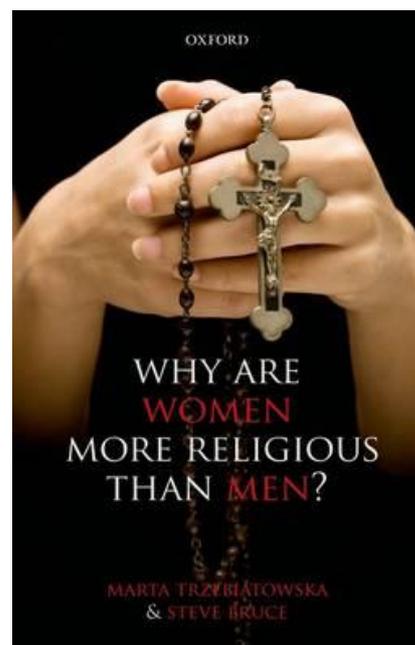
*Despite being excluded from leadership positions, in almost every culture and religious tradition, women are more likely than men to pray, to worship, and to claim that their faith is important to them. This book reviews the now-sizeable body of social research to consider if the gender gap in religion is indeed universal. **Marta Trzebiatowska** and **Steve Bruce** extensively critique competing explanations of the differences found. They conclude that the gender gap is not the result of biology but is rather the consequence of important social differences over-lapping and reinforcing each other. Reviewed by **Emma Smith**.*



**Why Are Women More Religious Than Men? Marta Trzebiatowska and Steve Bruce. Oxford University Press. September 2012.**

([http://www.amazon.co.uk/Why-Women-more-Religious-than/dp/0199608105/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1350653962&sr=8-1](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Why-Women-more-Religious-than/dp/0199608105/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1350653962&sr=8-1))  
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In an era of growing secularism, one might question the need to examine the place and significance of religiosity in today's societies. Indeed, countless authors have already attempted this, addressing such issues as the transformation from traditional forms of religion to encompassing newer, alternative religious and spiritual options (Taylor, 2007 (<http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674026766>)), and the potentially conflicting polarisation between those who strictly adhere to either fundamentalist religion, or modern secular thought (Habermas, 2010 (<http://www.polity.co.uk/book.asp?ref=9780745647203>)). Further, while it has been observed that there have been profound changes in the place of religion in society, with important implications arising from this, it can be queried as to how such literature can be developed. One possibility relates to the subject of women's presence within religious institutions, and their associated high levels of religiosity, such is the focus of this recent publication from experienced lecturers in the sociology of religion, Marta Trzebiatowska (<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/socsci/staff/details.php?id=m.k.trzebiatowska>) and Steve Bruce (<http://www.abdn.ac.uk/socsci/staff/details.php?id=s.bruce>).



The focus of the book is made clear from the outset, where Trzebiatowska and Bruce observe a historical development, in terms of women increasingly occupying a greater presence than men in religious environments, hence their interest in questioning why women are more religious than men. Chapter one addresses this question directly, beginning with an examination of gender and religiosity in Britain. The decline of infant baptisms, particularly for boys (by way of example, in 1956, for every 1,000 teenagers, only 28 boys compared to 41 girls had been confirmed in the Church of England), and census information confirming higher religious affiliation amongst women, are presented as evidence of an apparent gender gap in religiosity, with women seemingly the predominant sex in church membership and attendance, sense of religious affiliation, and adherence to religious behaviours. The case of the USA is also examined, with similar, if not more pronounced patterns in gender and religiosity, drawn from various social surveys, due to the greater role of religion in US society.

This section here and elsewhere in the text, could have been improved by a closer examination of non-Christian societies, which are studied only briefly. There was a notable lack of data, for example, pertaining to the religious preferences and habits of men and women in China and the Middle East. It should be noted,

however, that the authors do account for such omissions; they highlight cross-religion comparisons of the relationship between gender and religion, as well as the difficulties of measuring religious interest and involvement more generally, as particular challenges to studying the links between gender and religion in non-Christian societies (on account of the need to be particularly attuned and sensitive to cultural norms other than our own, and the varying views on the limits of gender differences adopted by different religions).

The later chapters in the book develop the authors' initial observation of a gender gap in religion by accounting for the reasons why women may be more religious than men. Chapter six, for example, suggests that there are links between one's biology and associated gender roles and high religiosity. The authors 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 links to religion. In relation to childbirth for example, Trzebiatowska and Bruce observe that the process of pregnancy and childbirth provide women with a unique opportunity, unavailable to men, to engage in extra religious contemplation and modes of behaviour. In 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, and in turn 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 Catholic first communion.

Aside from biology, risk is discussed as another contributing factor towards women's higher religiosity. Chapter seven considers men's irreligion as a possible cause of women's greater involvement in religion. It is questioned whether men are more likely to take risks than women, with women, as a result of typically feminine traits e.g passivity, fearing the prospect of no afterlife, and consequently, engaging more with religion as a form of risk aversion.

At points throughout the text, it appeared that the authors assigned a fairly traditional, and if anything, dated perspective to the discussion of the roles of women and feminine traits, in relation to higher female religiosity. Such analysis might have been strengthened, had the authors considered the history of, and changes in gender role/attitude stereotyping (both in western and non-western, Christian and non-Christian world contexts, compared to the largely, Christian, westernised examples that form the focus of the text). This might have extended to an analysis of the implications of such changes, for women's greater involvement in religion, or conversely, women's increasing dissociation from religion, in line with the growing secularisation of men.

An additional point, on which the authors might have elaborated, pertains to the role of masculinity. Although, the text is intended to examine the role of women, and in parts, the influence of femininity, in religious involvement, the authors could have examined some counter-arguments. In particular, analysis could have been extended to consider masculinity in more detail, and how in some contexts, for example, within Islam, masculinity, and the presence and role of men is actually more significant than women, in religious involvement.

Throughout, however, the authors do not appear to adhere to any of the factors used to explain women's higher religiosity. Much of the study appears to be designed to present the possibilities, rather than draw out any main conclusions about the relationship between gender and religion; the main answer to the question of women's higher religiosity, being attributed more so to social differences between the sexes, and time-notably, men's earlier introduction to secularization than women, than any other factor (e.g., risk, as above). A more specific line of argument, presented at an earlier stage in the text, would have been helpful, however, for clarifying the authors' position on the issue.

With the exception of these points, Trzebiatowska and Bruce's book is recommended, for its accessibility, potential for wide readership, and its fit within, and development of the current literature on the topic.

Her PhD explores victim and statutory/voluntary agency responses to violence against sex workers. Other research interests include: health, policing, equality, sociology and research methods, particularly qualitative based methods. She has a MA Hons in History and Sociology from the University of Glasgow, a PGDip in Social Research from Glasgow Caledonian University, and an MSc in Applied Social Research from the University of Stirling. Read more reviews by Emma (<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsereviewofbooks/category/book-reviewers/emma-smith/>).

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