

Marta Trzebiatowska and Steve Bruce

Why are Women more Religious than Men?

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The interaction between gender and religion is an important topic in the study of religion, which is attractive for scholars of various disciplines. Two sociologists of religion, Marta Trzebiatowska and Steve Bruce, have approached the question of why women are more religious than men in their recently published book, which contributes to the ongoing scientific investigation of gender and religion. Their primary purpose was “to bring together in one convenient location a mass of descriptive material and to lay out as clearly as possible the range of explanations that are currently offered for such patterns as scholars claim to find” (p. vii).

This book consists of ten chapters that discuss diverse aspects and contexts of the interaction between gender and religion. The first chapter “The Great Divide” serves as the introduction and provides an analysis of gender and religion relations in Christian and other societies. It argues that “gender is one of the most obvious social divisions and social markers of division” (p. 22). It seems that religion is one of the social arenas where these divisions manifest themselves: social data provided in the chapter suggest that the religious preferences of men and women differ.

The second chapter analyses the relations between gender and religion within new religions, provides stories of women leaders of diverse religious movements and discusses the role of women within the new religious movements that emerged in the late sixties. The authors challenge the conclusions of other scholars of new religions about women in these groups and they conclude that women are more religious than men in these settings.

The third chapter analyses the role of women within the spiritualism phenomenon and argues that it is “both illustration of women’s religious interests and a source of possible explanations for that interest” (p. 61).

The authors turn to the analysis of spirituality and the role of gender within it in the fourth chapter. This chapter argues that spirituality allows greater freedom for women to innovate than the conventional religious milieu and thus attracts more women than men.

The fifth chapter of the book provides an analysis into conservative religions and gender roles within them. With the help of examples from Evangelical and Pentecostal communities, the authors arrive at the challenging conclusion that “women like patriarchy”, and that “women can ignore or subvert that they do not like” (p. 93).

The sixth chapter provides a sociobiological analysis of gender, gender roles and religion. In this chapter, the authors discuss how a woman’s life course may influence her religious life – giving birth and raising children, nursing the sick and dying, and caring. They argue that “because women are more caring, they are more likely than men to be attracted to a life-world that promotes a message of love and compassion” (p. 106). Religion for many women seems to be this kind of world, according to the authors.

The seventh chapter discusses men’s irreligion as the other side of the coin, where the argument that women are more religious than men is engraved. Risk and risk taking, according

to the authors, is one of the features attributed to men. However, the authors conclude that this does not help us to understand the differences between women and men in terms of religiosity.

The eighth chapter of this book discusses the ways that religion is lived among Muslim and Jewish women. The authors conclude that, “while women strive for the right to practice religion in ways that maximize their enjoyment of the sacred, they often do so on behalf of others, less spiritually capable or less eager to perform their religious obligations” (p. 146).

The ninth chapter is dedicated to a discussion about the secularisation process and its consequences. The authors argue that the consequences of secularisation are felt more strongly in the public sphere and that they are felt earlier and more strongly by men than by women (p. 148). Men started to disaffiliate from the churches and this led to the increase of women churchgoers, argue the authors.

The tenth chapter of Trzebiatowska and Bruce’s book provides a final discussion about the research question. It discusses the limitations of the work and lists the factors that help to answer the study’s initial question. According to the authors, these factors include secularisation, patriarchy, control of sexuality and changed gender roles. At the end of the chapter, the authors provide five summarised conclusions. These lead the authors to the final conclusion that women are more religious than men due to secularisation, which has had a greater effect on men than women. However, recent social changes have undoubtedly weakened and reduced the differences between men and women with regard to religiosity in Western societies.

To sum up, it is possible to challenge the focus of this book and its argument that the effect of secularisation is one of the main reasons why women are more religious than men. And this challenge is grounded on the fact that the main empirical evidence for the book’s central argument derives from data coming from UK. The argument, therefore, is hardly applicable for other societies, especially those in the US and/or post-Communist societies. However, their other arguments explaining why women are more religious than men, such as patriarchy, changing gender roles and the control of sexuality, seem to be more applicable for these societies. The book is well-structured and well-argued, with very strong empirical material – made up of narratives of religious women and their followers and collected social and historical research data.

Despite the reservations above, it should be stressed that Marta Trzebiatowska and Steve Bruce’s book “Why Women are More Religious than Men?” is an important and timely contribution to the study of gender and religion and can be recommended to university students, teachers and anyone who is interested in the challenging question posed by the book’s title.