

The Magic of Statistics : Sociology, Psychology and Women in the Church

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During the recently celebrated women's liberation year, the cry—and indeed a just cry—was for equal rights with men in those social and economic areas where male dominance reigns. For the same work, the same wages, no matter the sex; in marriage, equality of status and the same rights, for both husband and wife; in general social benefits, no difference between men and women. The Church for countless centuries, despite the relative franchise it gave to women in its very early days based on a universalistic ethic, has been an impregnable bastion of male power. No wonder the call for female liberation has penetrated into the traditional churches, especially the Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches. The result so far is not very encouraging. Admittedly women are allowed to do more than in former years and are often strongly represented in local Church councils, but to become a priest, and therefore eventually a bishop remains a strictly tabooed function for women. In the Free churches, the interdict has been removed in modern times but few women have in fact been ordained and even fewer have reached positions of prominence as Church leaders.

But if women's cards are poor in bidding for equality in function and leadership, they have a very good hand in their general support of the church. Their attendance and devotion are out of all proportion to the position they occupy in the hierarchical structure. At Mass on Sundays, on weekdays, coming out of a Baptist or Anglican Church, who predominates? Always the answer is females. This phenomenon which appears so widespread invites curiosity and enquiry. The parish priest wonders about it and seeks schemes to restore the balance, for example by providing, as was the custom, men's clubs and boys' clubs, and getting men to do masculine things in and around the parish. The sociologist and the psychologist see the phenomenon as something not only widespread but open to scientific explanation by reference to social and emotional factors. But for the observer who wants to begin to explore the subject, not least because of its intrinsic fascination, where should he begin?

To examine this and other socio-psychological phenomena within religion, a useful starting point might perhaps be made with a recent book, *The Social Psychology of Religion* by Michael Argyle

and Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi.¹ It first appeared in 1958 with the title *Religious Behaviour*. Written by Michael Argyle it proved a serviceable and almost unique book. It was valued by sociologists of religion, who were then beginning to teach the subject in universities, and although it was not strictly sociological, it did provide, as virtually no other book did, data relating to contemporary religious faith and practice. The book has now been revised and brought up to date. The format is very much the same as before. There are chapters on age and religion, sex differences and religion, and social and economic factors in relationship to religion. Certain subjects such as those on personality and religion, social and political attitudes of church members, have been expanded. Despite the vast quantity of new data and references, several weaknesses, which dogged the former edition, remain. The first is that, on their own confession, the authors confine themselves to studies made in Great Britain and the United States: there is nothing from the vast material on church practice on the Continent, which is now available. The second is that the authors' selection of articles, certainly on the sociology of religion, shows a tendency to rely on American rather than British sources. And third, as in *Religious Behaviour*, there exists an enthusiastic readiness to lump together results of surveys carried out in Great Britain with those conducted in the United States. The purpose is to show that various sets of results substantiate one another. Further, the time when the surveys were taken, does not seem to be taken into account. In some instances, the culture and the time factor may be of little importance, but in others, as in attitudes to war, great care has to be used in relating findings of surveys made in different countries and in different epochs. In short, one of the failings of the book is that the authors are uncritical about the methods used in the collection of data, and above all, the uses to which they put the results. Their manipulation of statistics is, to say the least, naive.

With this in mind we briefly look at what they have to say about the male-female differentiation just referred to (see Chapter 5). They claim that 'this is ... one of the most important statistical comparisons to be made' in the book (page 71). Their data covers several aspects of religiosity. Church membership in the U.S.A. in 1936 had the sex ratio of 1:25, which was similar to the results of a Gallup Poll in the U.S.A. in 1972, with a ratio of 1:22. The authors also present figures for private devotions, beliefs, mystical experience, and so on. With some indicators, denominational variations are declared, for example, according to one well-known sur-

¹*The Social Psychology of Religion*. By Michael Argyle and Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London and Boston, 1975. 246 pp. £5.95 hard. £2.95 paper.

vey in York (1951), non-conformist congregations were the most 'female', and Roman Catholic congregations the most 'male'. Sets of figures are all neatly laid one on top of the other so as to give weight to the contention that 'women are more religious on every criterion' than men (page 71). Such a conclusion is derived from the use of but one variable—sexual differentiation. No consideration whatever is given to age, marital status, or social class. Each of these is considered as a separate and isolated variable in different chapters. But by such means the authors make the staggering claim that 'it is possible to derive various indices of *how much more* religious they (women) are' (page 71). (My italics). But it should also be noted that the authors change their indices from one type to another as in Table 5.6, where incidentally they completely misread the figures in the accompanying text.

However, if the game is to present such sorts of statistics, let us supply the authors with more drawn from an even wider context, and which like those presented by the authors, might accord with the reader's experience. Here they all relate to church attendance over the past twenty years or so. (References are minimal but details can be had from the writer.)

Place	Year	% of attendances female
Liege	1954	61
Brussels	1951	61
Marseilles	1953	65
San Paolo	[?]	66
Lyon (St Pothin)	1954	67
Scunthorpe (all denominations)	1954	61
Chicago (R.C. parish)	1953	62
Winnipeg (3 Anglican parishes)	1960-1	61
Sunderland (an Anglican parish)	1970	64
Newcastle (a Presbyterian church)	1970	68

What is so alluring, perhaps seductive, is the relative consistency of all the statistics presented. Not only is the weighting always in the same direction, but irrespective of time (within 20 years or perhaps more), of country, of denomination, of overall size of congregation, they all tell the same story—that at public worship there is a *roughly* constant ratio of females to males of 65 to 35. How is it that *different* denominations, striving to do what they can for the Lord in *different* ways of worship, and in *different* countries, all produce much the same result? And also, over a given period of time, there would seem to be a tendency towards constancy in

ratios. In an Anglican parish church in Scunthorpe for all recorded Communion in 1895 (absolute figure 1,448) 58% were for females. In 1906, after which time no more statistics of this kind were kept, the percentage was also 58% (absolute figure 1,694). For the intervening years the maximum percentage was 61, the minimum 56. Do all these figures add up to a strange coincidence? A numerical hoax? A mystery about numbers bordering on the occult? Or is there something here that has meaning? A social reality to be explained rationally?

Beware of the attractive simplicity of figures like these! They should seduce only the naive. Why overlay the mystery of religious behaviour with capricious statistical indices? In themselves they mean little more than that as a general rule more women attend public worship than men. Behind each ratio there may be a different story. For, as has already been noted, no mention has been made of age, and it is possible to imagine that one congregation could have many young women and a few old men, and another, many old women and a few young men. Nor are we told in any of the cases what the sex distribution in the general population is. Thus, given these simple descriptive statements all we can do is to make a jump from an exact figure to a general and imprecise conclusion, in company with Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi, that according to a number of indicators women are 'more religious' than men. So much for the value of these statistics! At least simple counts cannot be contradicted!

To proceed further. It is sometimes said that sexual differentiation within religious matters tends to be associated more with practice and devotion than belief. The proposition needs to be carefully analysed for it has never been thoroughly tested. Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi by marshalling evidence on private prayer (a very feminine activity) and on the acceptance of certain beliefs, broadly support the claim that women tend to be more 'religious' in action (not in belief) than men. I tentatively came to a similar conclusion in also examining the practice of private prayer and contrasting it with a belief in a life after death. The first showed a very strong female weighting, while the second produced no variation with regard to sexual differentiation.² This approach is very limited but some parallel evidence can also be seen in another direction, in the recruitment to religious orders. The question is admittedly a complex one as is evident in Michael Hill's *The Religious Order* (1973). But one thing is evident that in recent times at least, membership

²*The Place of Religion in the Social Structures of Two English Industrial Towns (Rawmarsh, Yorkshire, and Scunthorpe, Lincolnshire)*. By W.S.F. Pickering. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, London University, 1957, p xiv. 30.

of women's orders and the number of different orders for women far outnumber the corresponding categories for men. In 1965 according to Vatican sources there were three female religious to every male religious. In religious orders in the Anglican Church there is no doubt a similar lack of balance.

Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi have no hesitation in offering an explanation—rather in offering seven theories—which would unlock the puzzle about the general level of female religious devotion. The theories are given greater space in the new book than in the old and are in the main psychological, based on the emotional traits of men and women, or the specific functions of religion which are held to be more attractive to women than to men. We set out below the theories they have collected, regrouped into six, and given a slightly different order.

1. Many deep psychological differences exist between men and women which are most likely biologically determined. For the most part females are less aggressive than males, and therefore more passive and submissive. From this it can be argued that in these days of declining religious affiliation, women will stay with the church more than men, since they accept the demands of religion and do not rebel against them as do men. Similarly, there have been those writers who have said that, partly on psychological grounds, girls are more open to 'conformity, suggestibility and persuasibility' (page 78). (And, as Herbert Spencer suggests, to authority, be it political or religious.)

2. In the Hebraic-Christian tradition, God is a projected father figure. Following Freud, children prefer the opposite sex-parent: girls are thus attracted not only to their fathers but to a male divinity, and we might add, to priests and other male functionaries. Conversely, Catholicism, with the mother figure of the Virgin Mary attracts men. (But is there any empirical evidence to show that amongst Catholics, males more than females are drawn to the Virgin Mary, consciously or unconsciously? And more address their private prayers to her?)

3. If religion has the function of relieving guilt feelings, and this is certainly the case of Christianity, and if it is assumed that women have a greater sense of guilt than men, there exists an obvious reason why women appear to be more religious than men. Extreme Protestantism strongly emphasises sin, and with it, salvation and conversion. It has been noted that certain Evangelical sects are predominantly female. We might add that Catholicism allows for the assuaging of guilt feelings through confession and that it is fairly well established that amongst Catholics more women go to confession than men.

4. Theories of socialization suggest the importance of cultural factors, determined by the ideals of society and printed on people's minds through training and education. But those who plump for this approach in explaining the male-female imbalance say 'all cultures' emphasize 'nurturance, obedience and responsibility' for *girls* (page 77). On the whole, boys are trained for self-reliance and independence, and they are taught to repress rather than openly express their emotions.

5. Others have seen work and involvement in industry as the key. Luckmann holds that it is the non-workers who are found in church—the young, women, and the old. Middle-aged married women see themselves identified as workers. We might note that this is a variation of Veblen's theory which he put forward in *The Theory of the Leisure-Class*.

6. (One would expect a deprivation-compensation theory to rear its ugly head!) Since women are more deprived than men in many ways, it is argued, they compensate for it by being religious. To be a member of a church or sect, to experience fantasies, to indulge in myths, to be one of 'the elect', are ways of overcoming frustration, frequently sexual.

Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi leave the explanations there. They do not back one over against the rest: supposedly they are all tenable. An uncritical procedure such as this stands hardly within the canons of science or the criterion of Occam's razor.

The weakness of all the theories based on psychological or biopsychological factors mentioned above (1-3) is that data on which any of the theories are constructed relate to the present day and to western society. Yet the theories claim universality and stand therefore without reference to time or locality. But the phenomenon under consideration, religion, is essentially a cultural one which is subject to almost infinite variation according to different societies and according to time. Even within one religion and one geographical area, the constancy of certain characteristics of the religion is often extremely difficult to establish. And what of the issue of male-female differentiation in western Christendom as we proceed along a historical axis? In Edwardian times in England, probably the ratio, not the size of the congregations, was much as it is today. But before that? Alas, we have very few comparable statistics. However, every indication would seem to point to the fact that at the time of the Reformation, in both Catholic and Protestant countries, during the Middle Ages, and before that in the Dark Ages, as missionaries pursued their task of converting the whole of the known world, and further back to the apostolic Church, religion was very much a masculine affair. No doubt there are cases of certain cults in medieval

times having an overwhelming following of women. But were men's religious orders less numerous than those for women? Were there more women at church than men? Hardly so. And if we think of some lay groups as being dominantly male, such as the medieval guilds, what religious societies are there today with exclusive male membership which at the same time are powerful within the church or society? If the psychological arguments are valid for contemporary religion, they are scarcely applicable in previous centuries. Hence the universalism of such arguments is null and void.

Supposing one turns to another religious group that has long existed in Europe, the Jews. Not only today, but over the length of its history the synagogue has always known an overwhelming proportion of male worshippers. In the orthodox synagogue, men still occupy the ground floor; women the gallery. And further, should we extend the focus of interest to include religions the world over, the picture becomes even more male-dominated. What of Islam? Of Mithraism? Of Buddhism? Of Sikhism? Of primitive religions? Of Confucianism (if it be held to be a religion)? This is no occasion to consider in detail each major religion or even a sample of primitive religions, but the evidence seems overwhelming—despite certain female-dominated religions, e.g. some sections of Greek religion³—outside Christianity, and modern Christianity at that, religion is an essentially masculine affair, dominated by male functionaries and involving in ritual and other practices more men than women. If religion were thought to be an essentially female activity, we would have had priestesses, prophetesses and 'bishopesses' in abundance years ago in the Christian Church. Even where we do possess a fair measure of historical and statistical data, as in the modern western scene, there is no evidence to show that women are *intrinsically* more pious than men. The conclusion is incontrovertible. Any theory or explanation about male-female differentiation in religion will have to give a very large, if not exclusive place to social or cultural factors. That women are held to be inherently passive, acceptive of authority, and so on, makes little or no contribution to an explanation of the phenomenon with which we started this essay. Indeed, can psychology make any contribution at all at this point?

What can be postulated within the Christian context, and its particular ethos today, is that girls are encouraged to be pious and to act religiously, whereas boys are allowed or taught to be aggressive and rebellious, and carry out a minimum of religious duties. A

³For example. Strabo, the Greek writer, observed: 'For all agree in regarding the women as the chief founders of religion, and it is the women who provoke the men to more attentive worship of the gods, to festivals, and to supplications, and it is a rare thing, for a man who lives by himself to be found addicted to these things.' Lib. vii. 297.

parallel immediately comes to mind. In large sections of our society, in the working-classes, it is the mother, not the father, who generally has the function of the bearer of culture, widely or snobishly defined. The mother is responsible for the education of the children, their moral standards, their religious upbringing, their interests in music (if any), their reading (outside school or before school). These functions are not as a rule the father's. This allocation of function is not according to actual or alleged inherent qualities: it is socially determined. Fr. Fichter, the American sociologist, has said in conversation that girls are taught to go to weekday Mass and to be devout in other ways, but apart from attending Sunday Mass, boys are encouraged to go to ball games and be practical about the parish. In his book *Social Relations in a Southern Parish* (1954) he observed that of people of all ages going to confession 36 per cent were male, as were 20 per cent of those attending evening services, and 24 per cent of those at Lent services (page 90). We might add that these attitudes are inculcated when the child is very young and then persist by continual reinforcement through exhortation in the church, in the home, and at school, where pressures are also exerted by positive and negative sanctions to encourage boys and girls to adhere to their respective norms. The force of the tides in these directions are very strong. Attempts by some churches to reverse them have not been marked with success. For example, 'muscular Christianity' made its appearance in the 19th century in the Anglican Church. It was associated with public schools in an attempt to make religion meaningful and attractive amongst boys and was often coupled with a para-military ethos. But its results had little lasting effect, although evangelical movements within the more established churches often, and still today, have a fair number of male members and supporters. Witness, for example, the success of the boys' Crusader Movement in South London in the 1930s. (A Catholic name for an evangelical group!) These days muscular Christianity offers little appeal, especially as sexual roles are undergoing change. An appeal to former well-defined roles is often seen as possessing ideological overtones, and the cry 'all boys together' is now pilloried.

The weakness of an explanation based on a simple socialization theory, as is the one just mentioned, is that it rests solely on a technique for disseminating an idea, moral, or value. The content of the idea is according to this type of explanation irrelevant. The technique explains only the means of persistence. In the case under scrutiny, it is the content of the idea (that women should be pious) which has to be accounted for in terms of its ideological acceptance, especially as we have noted that religion in the wide sweep has

been historically male-dominated and supported.

In the terms in which we have set the problem, any explanation of the male-female differentiation would have to take notice of the following factors:

1. That Christianity contains within itself an ideological component that potentially or actually allows for or encourages, or permits society to allow for or encourage, a wide following of and devotion amongst women. As was stated previously, Christianity at a theoretical or doctrinal level is essentially non-discriminatory within our terms of reference. Far from standing opposed to people of different races, classes, and sexes (cf. Mithraism, Islam, etc.), it embraces humanity. Its movement is basically that of reconciliation. That women have hitherto been accorded a relatively small or non-existent say in religious affairs has not been due to theological factors but rather cultural ones—and anti-women tradition, partly based on notions of male dominance found in Judaism and partly on a widespread notion of hierarchy. Nevertheless, there exists no New Testament doctrine, save certain directives by St. Paul, now hotly disputed, which would exclude women from full participation in church affairs, and there is no reason why theoretically women could not ‘take over’ or dominate the church.

2. Changes have occurred in the historical development of Christianity, and the social milieu in which it has existed, which need to be more fully explored. It is necessary to account for some kind of change or reversal to show how it is that women now constitute a numerically larger group than men. Here one cannot overlook the possibility of the institutional following of the church, and maybe more importantly, in the severance of the church from the state in England and elsewhere, if not *de jure* then *de facto*. Bound up with this is the loss of social and economic power of the church. The result is that it has become a voluntary body, socially weak and ineffective. Thus, contemporary religion has become increasingly a domestic activity, even a leisure-time activity. If it is seen as being home-like in nature, it will in many people’s eyes be also seen as the responsibility of the woman.

Mysteries are compounded, not solved by magic. The phenomenon with which this article started is far more complicated than any naive or magical set of statistics would indicate. It turns out to be something of a mystery, as is woman herself (or man himself). In order to come to terms with the mystery certain crudities of approach must be discarded. In their place, approaches along the lines of doctrine and sociological history offer most promise, if only in unravelling some of the circumstances of the mystery.