

Armies of Women

DESPITE THE CONSTANT COMPLAINTS OF FEMINISTS about the patriarchal tendencies of Christianity, men are largely absent from the Christian churches of the modern Western world. Women go to church; men go to football games. Lay men attend church activities because a wife, mother, or girlfriend has pressured them. As Tom Forrest, a priest active in international evangelization, points out, only 25 percent of the participants in Catholic gatherings he has attended are men, and “when men do come, they are often brought along with some resistance by their wives.”¹ The strategy of American revivalists in the Second Great Awakening in the

gage in private religious activities far less often. British sociologists Michael Argyle and Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi have observed that “the sex ratio [women to men] is consistently greater for saying daily prayers than for church attendance or membership. The latter are again more under the influence of social pressures, while prayers are a private matter and reflect more spontaneous religious concerns. This suggests that the larger sex ratios should be taken more seriously than the smaller one.”³ The lack of commitment by men to the practice of the Christian religion is even more pronounced than the statistics for membership and external practice suggest.

In general, men who have a strong connection with the feminine through a close relationship with a wife, mother, or girlfriend are more likely to be involved in Christian activities than men who do not. If a man goes to church, he goes because a woman has wheedled him into what he would normally consider unmanly behavior. But if he goes voluntarily, he suffers suspicions about his masculinity. John K. White summarizes the popular attitude: “A devastating criticism of Christianity is many men see it as not only irrelevant, but as effeminate. Words and phrases such as ‘unmanly,’ ‘for women and kids,’ ‘wimps,’ and ‘they can’t make it so they hide behind God’ are common.”⁴ Writing from his experience of charismatic communities, Stephen Clark laments that “Contemporary Christians often lack an ideal of manly character, and they do not value some of the character traits that ought to be prominent in a man The contemporary picture of Christian character is all too often feminine, and the Victorian notion of femininity at that.”⁵

THE RELIGIOUS MALE

The clergy have long had the reputation of not being very masculine. The mainline, liberal Protestant minister in the early twentieth century had a reputation for being soft and working best with women. This reputation provided fuel for fundamentalists, who denounced liberals as “little infidel preacherettes”⁶ in sermons with such titles as “She-Men, or How to Become Sissies.”⁷ But all clergy were open to attack, all had to face the “popular stereotype that men of the cloth

were neither male nor female.”⁸ The clergy were seen as exempt from masculine trials and agonies; they were part of the safe world of women. As one layman put it, “life is a football game, with the men fighting it out on the gridiron, while the minister is up in the grandstand, explaining it to the ladies.”⁹

In nineteenth-century New England, ministers of the most important churches were “hesitant promulgators of female virtues in an era of militant masculinity.”¹⁰ But the dominant churches of nineteenth-century New England had long been feminized. Not only was the proportion of women in the churches extremely high, both the milieu and the ministers of the church were far more feminine than masculine. Businessmen disdained the clergy as “people halfway between men and women.”¹¹ Ministers found the most congenial environment, not in businesses, political clubs, or saloons, but “in the Sunday school, the parlor, the library, among women and those who flattered and resembled them.”¹² Moreover, they were typically recruited from the ranks of weak, sickly boys with indoor tastes who stayed at home with their mothers and came to identify with the feminine world of religion. The popular mind often joined “the idea of ill health with the clerical image.”¹³ In the vision of Unitarian minister Charles Fenton (1796-1842), playing Sunday school children have replaced stern Pilgrim Fathers and “adult politics have succumbed to infantile piety, *Ecclesia* to a nursery. Masculinity is vanquished in the congregation and, even more significantly, in the pulpit.”¹⁴

By the end of the nineteenth century, the effeminacy of the mainline Protestant clergy had become a commonplace of satire. A Catholic novel, *The Last Rosary*, caricatured the minister: “He was a Methodist, a Revivalist, a Baptist, an advocate of women’s rights, an earnest worker in the field of missionary labor, provided said field consisted in gliding here and there to nice little evening parties, shaking hands—or, more properly speaking, finger tips—with ladies whose age forbade the custom of whole-hand shaking. . . . Mild tea drinking, a little sherry, claret occasionally, and other helps of spiri-tuous kind, did go some length in elevating whatever there was of manhood in his composition to thoughts of heroic work and conver-

sion of sinners.”¹⁵ But Catholics, too, had their problems in nineteenth-century America, if we may judge by the repeated efforts to get Catholic men to attend to their religious duties.¹⁶

During the first half of the nineteenth century the English identified weakness and femininity with saintliness. George Arthur, the most Christian figure in Thomas Hughes’s *Tom Brown’s School Days* has an “overidentification with his mother and sisters.”¹⁷ On his sickbed, he looks like “A German picture of an angel . . . transparent and golden and spirit-like.”¹⁸ To be Christian, for the mid-Victorians, was to lack the exuberant physical masculinity of the normal boy, to be weak, to be helpless, to be a victim. In other words, the religious man was like the Victorian ideal of woman, who was supposed to suffer from mysterious complaints, to be unable to engage in vigorous activity, and to find sex distasteful. C. H. Spurgeon complained that “There has got abroad a notion, somehow, that if you become a Christian you must sink your manliness and turn milksop.”¹⁹

The masculinity of Anglo-Catholics has often been questioned. “[E]ffeminate fanatics” and “womanish men” were some of the milder criticisms of these “not conspicuously virile men.”²⁰ Kingsley’s attack on John Henry Newman in *Water Babies* is grossly unfair; but Kingsley was upset by what he perceived as a lack of masculinity in Newman’s celibacy. Bishop Wilburforce of Oxford, in general a supporter of the high church movement, found the Anglo-Catholic seminarians at Cuddesdon “too peculiar,”²¹ and indeed contemporary historians conjecture that “a homosexual sensibility ha[d] expressed itself within Anglo-Catholicism.”²² The Ritualists, the party among Anglo-Catholics who were more interested in ritual than doctrine, were especially peculiar. They boasted that “we find that multitudes of young people, especially of young men, who have never concerned themselves with the Church or with religion, have been attracted . . . by the Church’s reformed and animated services.”²³ In *Brideshead Revisited* Evelyn Waugh has Cousin Jasper warn Charles Ryder: “Beware of the Anglo-Catholics—they’re all sodomites with unpleasant accents.”²⁴ The vicar in Pat Barker’s *The Ghost Road* “was one of those Anglo-Catholic young men who waft about in a posi-

tive miasma of stale incense and seminal fluid.”²⁵ The whole atmosphere of Anglo-Catholicism, its preciousness, its fussiness, its concern for laces and cassocks and candles, struck the average Victorian (and later observers) as unmanly.

Hugh McLeod notes that the homosexual subculture of late Victorian England “quite consciously combined homosexuality (or ‘Uranianism’ as it was often termed) with Roman Catholic or, more often, Anglo-Catholic religion.”²⁶ Roman Catholicism attracted converts such as Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley, and Lionel Johnson.²⁷ James R. Moore, discussing Cardinal Manning’s paean to the Catholic Revival and the memoirs of a young convert to Catholicism, St. George Jackson Mivart, dryly notes that “His [Mivart’s] aesthetic preferences—architectural, theatrical, sartorial—his perceptions of older men, and the single-sex camaraderie of his education will not go unnoticed by twentieth-century readers. These suggest rather different explanations than Manning offered for the penetration of the Catholic Church in England.”²⁸ Moore cannot resist the innuendo of “penetration” to suggest that interest in religion is equivalent to passive homosexuality.

Anglo-Catholics among the clergy of the Church of England continue to attract attention for their weak masculinity. In the mid-1990s several hundred Anglo-Catholic clergy wanted to leave the Church of England for Rome, largely because of the Anglican decision to ordain women and all that it implies for the Anglican claims to catholicity and to the possession of valid orders. The Roman Catholic Church in England has a shortage of priests, but has been hesitant to accept these converts as clerics. Liberal English Roman Catholics warn the hierarchy of the “misogyny” of these Anglo-Catholics, many of whom are single—misogyny a polite euphemism for homosexuality. As Paul Johnson writes, “We have certainly learned in recent years what some Anglican clerics have known all along, that the Church is riddled with deviant sexuality. Some time ago, one or two Anglican theological colleges were dominated by sodomites, and the consequences are still with us.”²⁹ William Oddie, who was ordained as an Anglican, admits that Johnson gives a “slightly tactless but nevertheless accurate description of reality.”³⁰

The situation is similar in Episcopal and Roman Catholic churches in the United States.

The clergy of the Anglo-Saxon world are not the only ones to suffer doubts about their masculinity. In Spain, for instance, the main exception to the male detachment from religion has been its priests. These men have usually been shielded from the harsh tests that other Spanish men have to undergo to prove their manhood and do not have “the sensitivity wrung out of them and the hardness in-stilled in them that normally happens in the course of attaining manhood in the village. They are better able to preserve affection for Mary, and in seminary they feel no need to be ashamed of sentimentality.”³¹ The men of the village tell “endless stories about the priests’ ambiguous sexual position” and make “jokes referring to priests’ emasculation.”³²

Studies have tended to confirm the popular stereotype of the unmanly cleric. The more masculine the man, the less likely he is to be interested in religion; the more feminine the man, the more likely he is to be interested in religion. Patricia Sexton recognized, as far back as the 1960s, the hostility to masculinity in American society, noting that the highest masculinity scores in one study were found among bright underachievers, boys who were intelligent but had little use for the feminized milieu of schools. She also notes that a “striking characteristic of low scholarship boys was their low level of interest in religion.”³³

Lewis M. Terman and Catherine Cox Miles used, in their study, a Masculinity-Femininity test that characterized answers to a questionnaire as indicative of masculinity and femininity if men tended to answer a question one way and women another.³⁴ In other words, the test was descriptive and did not engage arguments about what is essentially masculine or feminine. Young men, athletic men, and uneducated men tended to be more consistently masculine than old men, sedentary men, and educated men. Men who were interested in religion were less masculine than the average man: “Interest in religion or art is a mark of definitely greater femininity than lack of interest in these matters.”³⁵ Men who showed little interest in religion had more masculine scores: “Most masculine of all are still the

men who have little or no interest in religion.”³⁶ Very masculine men showed little interest in religion, very feminine men great interest.³⁷ Women who had highly feminine scores were also “specially religious,”³⁸ while women who had more masculine scores were neutral or adverse to religion. The difference was clearly not physical sex, but attitude, or gender, as the term is now used.

Terman and Miles gathered data from three groups: Catholic seminarians, Protestant seminarians, and Protestant ministers. As one might expect, men attracted to the religious life differed strikingly in their masculinity from the general male population: “The Catholic student priests score at a point far less masculine than any other male group of their age; in their early twenties they are more feminine than the general male population at middle life. The Protestant theological students in their middle twenties are, however, more feminine than they and exceed in femininity the sixty-year-old man of equal education. The adult ministerial group is barely more masculine than the Protestant theological students and less so than the student priests. They exceed in femininity the college men of the seventh decade.”³⁹ Terman and Miles concluded that “some dominant factors must be present in all three groups to make them, without regard to age, conspicuously and almost equally lacking in mental masculinity.”⁴⁰ Interestingly enough, the similarities between the Protestant and Catholic groups and the Catholic group’s slightly higher scores ruled out celibacy as a major factor in a lack of masculinity. Nor does the lack of masculinity have any necessary connection with sexual deviance.⁴¹

WESTERN RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE

Every sociologist, and indeed every observer, who has looked at the question has found that women are more religious than men.⁴² While they realize “religiosity may be measured in a number of ways,” they also have confirmed the observations of pastors and others that “on most measures, women appear more religious than men.”⁴³ James H. Fichter asks “Are males really less religious than females? Most of the studies made on the question seem to

indicate that they are, and this appears to be true for all the Christian churches, denominations, and sects in Western civilization”⁴⁴ Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi claim “it is obvious that women are more religious than men on every criterion.”⁴⁵ Argyle generalizes: “Women are more religious than men on all criteria, particularly for private prayer, also for membership, attendance, and attitude.”⁴⁶ C. Daniel Bassoon and W. Larry Ventis note that “there is considerable evidence that women are more likely to be interested and involved in religion than men.”⁴⁷ Gail Malmgreen points out the disparity between the gender of the clergy and the gender of the faithful: “In modern Western cultures, religion has been a predominantly female sphere. In nearly every sect and denomination of Christianity, though men monopolized the positions of authority, women had the superior numbers.”⁴⁸ Kenneth Guentert concurs: “The Roman Catholic Church has a rather rigid division of labor. The men have the priesthood. The women have everything else.”⁴⁹ For David de Vaus and Ian McAllister the difference is not simply one of numbers: “A consistent finding in studies of religion is that on a wide range of measures females tend to be more religious than males.”⁵⁰ George Gallup Jr. and Jim Castelli see the external differences as expressing different internal attitudes: “Women continue to place a higher value on religious involvement and to be more active in religious activities than do men.”⁵¹ Barry A. Kosmin and Seymour P. Lachman conclude that popular stereotypes are correct: “The lay and professional literature has consistently shown what ministers and parishioners have observed: that women are more likely than men to join religious organizations and participate actively. Christianity is especially associated with female spirituality. Adolescent girls exhibit stronger belief in the inerrancy of the Bible, and higher rates of participation in religious services.”⁵²

Patterns of religious observance differ both among and within nations, as might be expected, although there are no exceptions to the feminization of Western Christianity. American and French sociological research has developed the most extensive evidence for Christian feminization, but research in other countries, while scantier, has not revealed any divergence from this pattern. North-

ern countries may show a higher level of religious practice among men than southern countries; but it would be hard to show a lower level of practice, for Latin male is notoriously resistant to participation in the life of the church. Nor is the feminization of Christianity a recent development: it goes back to pre-industrial times.

Twentieth-Century America

The “rapid feminization of the mainline religious community”⁵³ in America has been going on for some time. The most exact figures for the United States come from the 1936 Census, the last governmental tally of religious affiliation: in Eastern Orthodoxy the ratio of women to men is .75-.99 to one; Roman Catholics, 1.09 to one; Lutherans, 1.04-1.23 to one; Mennonites, 1.14-1.16 to one; Friends, 1.25 to one; Presbyterians, 1.34 to one; Episcopalians, 1.37 to one; Unitarians, 1.40 to one; Methodists, 1.33-1.47 to one; Baptists, 1.35 to one; Assembly of God, 1.71 to one; Pentecostals, 1.71-2.09 to one; Christian Scientists, 3.19 to one.⁵⁴ Because the respondents to the census identified themselves by denomination, the census probably overstates the proportion of men in the liturgical churches because they practice infant baptism: a current non-believer who was baptized as a Catholic, for instance, will tend to identify himself as a Catholic. The charismatic churches have a higher proportion of women, but all churches except the Eastern Orthodox had a majority of women in their membership.

Not only do women join churches more than men do, they are more active and loyal. Of Americans in the mid-1990s, George Barna writes that “women are twice as likely to attend a church service during any given week. Women are also 50 percent more likely than men to say they are ‘religious’ and to state that they are ‘absolutely committed’ to the Christian faith.”⁵⁵ These gender differences seem to be increasing rapidly. Lyle E. Schaler, an authority on church growth, observes that “In 1952 the adult attenders on Sunday morning in the typical Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Lutheran, Disciples, or Congregational worship service were approximately 53 percent female and 47 percent male, almost exactly the

same as the distribution of the adult population. By 1986 . . . these ratios were closer to 60 percent female and 40 percent male with many congregations reporting a 67-37 or 65-35 ratio.”⁵⁶ In 1992, 43 percent of men attended church, in 1996 only 28 percent.⁵⁷ Patrick Arnold, a Jesuit of liberal theological leanings, claims that at churches he has visited “it is not at all unusual to find a female-to-male ratio of 2:1 or 3:1. I have seen ratios in parish churches as high as 7:1.” Furthermore, he notes, “some liberal Presbyterian or Methodist congregations are practically bereft of men.” Kenneth Woodward reports that Protestant pastors “say that women usually outnumber the men three to one.”⁵⁸ The Notre Dame Study of Catholic Parish Life showed that in the 1990s women continue to participate in church life far more than men do:

- More than 85 percent of those involved in ministry to the poor, sick and grieving are women, and social justice and peace efforts draw heavily on women.
- More than 80 percent of CCD teachers and sponsors of the catechumenate are women.
- More than 80 percent of the members of prayer groups are women.
- More than 75 percent of those who lead or take part in adult Bible study or religious discussions are women.
- Almost 60 percent of those involved in youth and recreational ministries are women.
- 52 percent of parish council members are female.
- 58 percent of those identified as the most influential leaders in the thirty-six-parish survey were women.⁵⁹

Women are more active in all aspects of church life, both in public and social activities, such as peace and justice committees, and in spiritual activities, such as prayer and Bible study.

The situation was much the same in the 1950s. In 1955 Ed Wilcock complained that “the average Catholic man considers reli-

gion a thing for women and children.”⁶⁰ Joseph H. Fichter, a Jesuit sociologist, admitted that “among Catholics women appear to pray more often and probably better than males. They say the rosary, attend Mass, novenas and evening devotions more frequently. In any parish more females than males go to confession and Communion. There are at least three times as many nuns in the United States as there are priests and brothers put together.”⁶¹ In all activities that demonstrate personal devotion and commitment, women outnumbered men by a vast margin: “Of every one hundred persons who go to confession, only thirty-six are males; of those who attend evening services, thirty are males; and, of those who attend special Lenten services, twenty-four are males.”⁶² Although parish activities have changed in the post-Vatican II era, as prayer groups replace novenas, women are still more active. Felt banners may have taken the place of embroidered altar cushions, but female hands still make them.

Moreover, men and women differ not simply in the frequency of their participation in church activities, but in the attitudes that inspire their participation. Attitudes are, of course, harder to quantify than participation. Nevertheless, the techniques of American political poll-taking have been applied to religious bodies by George Gallup Jr., a committed Episcopal layman with a long-standing interest in religion in American society. While the questions asked in the Gallup poll were somewhat vague, the replies confirmed the general pattern of difference between men and women in all matters of religion.⁶³ Men and women not only act differently, they feel differently when it comes to religion.

After reviewing poll data, George Barna observed that women tend

- strongly to assert that the Bible is totally accurate in all it teaches;
- strongly to affirm the importance of religious faith in their life;
- strongly to disagree that Christ sinned while he was on earth;
- to choose an orthodox, biblical description of their God;

- to meet the criteria for born-again Christians;
- to read their horoscope in a given month[!];
- strongly to agree that the Bible can be taken literally;
- to believe that if a person does not consciously accept Christ as their Savior, he will be condemned to hell;
- to contend that the Bible teaches that “money is the root of all evil.”⁶⁴

This difference of feelings about religious matters is evidence of deep differences in fundamental approaches to religion and basic attitudes of faith. The Search Institute of Minneapolis studied five mainline Protestant denominations and the Southern Baptist Convention to determine the quality of faith among church members. Male church members had a far higher percentage of “undeveloped faith,” which the Institute defined as a lack of both the vertical dimension, a close personal relationship with God, and the horizontal dimension, loving service of others. Large numbers of men and women in the mainline churches have a weak, undeveloped faith.⁶⁵

“Integrated faith” combines both vertical and horizontal dimensions, and the proportion of women to men who hold an integrated faith is three to two or two to one in the mainline denominations, the Southern Baptists being an exception. The only dimension in which men score consistently higher than women is in horizontal faith, the loving service of others without a close relationship to God.⁶⁶ Southern Baptists are more religious than members of mainline denominations: almost half of Southern Baptists have an integrated faith that combines a personal relationship to God and loving service of others. Southern Baptists also have more success in fostering the faith of their male members.

Edward H. Thompson Jr. summarizes the received wisdom: “Among women, religion appears to be more salient to everyday activities, personal faith is stronger, commitment to orthodox beliefs is greater, and involvement in religious ritual and worship is more common than among men.”⁶⁷ In African-American denominations the preponderance of women is extreme: “Throughout all varieties of

black religious activity, women represent from 75 to 90 percent of the participants.”⁶⁸ Surprisingly, “men are more underrepresented in rural than in urban churches.”⁶⁹

But female predominance in religion was noticed long before it was documented by contemporary sociologists and census takers. In *The Bible Status of Women*, published in 1926, after the Men and Church Forward movement had worked to bring men back to the church, Anna Lee Starr observed that “the Interchurch Movement’s Survey showed that in the Protestant church in America the ratio of women to men was fifty-nine to forty-one. Almost three-fifths of the membership are women.”⁷⁰ Of the two million Sunday school teachers, “it is claimed that sixty-seven percent”⁷¹ are women. David Macleod confirms this figure and hints at its significance: “Most [Sunday school] teachers were women—73 percent in the 1920 Indiana survey—and by a form of guilt by association, . . . male teachers were suspect.”⁷²

The departure of boys from Sunday school after age twelve was likewise noticed and lamented: “Sunday schools lost 60 to 80 percent of their boys between ages twelve and eighteen.”⁷³ Although girls left too, they did not leave in such numbers. The ratio of males to females in Sunday schools around 1920 declined from eighty-four per hundred at age six to forty-eight per hundred at age eighteen.⁷⁴ Nor did the boys ever return. Among the millions in the young people’s societies, “the proportion of females to males is two to one. It is safe to say that four-fifths of the superintendents of Junior work are women.”⁷⁵ Young men especially were absent: “Only some seven percent of the young men of the country are in the churches.”⁷⁶

Their criticism of the mainline churches notwithstanding, fundamentalist churches of this period did not escape the general feminization. As hard as they fought against it, they found that their congregations were predominantly female: “In 1910 a newspaper account of a talk by William Bell Bentley on ‘The Church and Men’ noted that three-fourths of his audience was female, despite the sending of 2,000 invitations to the men of Minneapolis.”⁷⁷

At the turn of the century, the New York Baptist minister Cortland Myers asked, “Where are the men?”⁷⁸ Myers had noticed

that “in New York City not more than three percent of the male population are members of Protestant churches” and that the percentage for Catholics was little better.⁷⁹ The lack of membership was made worse by the lack of participation in services by male church members: “Of the membership of the churches nearly three-fourths are women. Of the attendants in most places of worship nine-tenths are women. In one great church I counted two hundred women and ten men.”⁸⁰ A 1902 *New York Times* survey of church attendance in Manhattan showed that “69 percent of Manhattan worshippers were women.”⁸¹

Shortly before Myers described the situation in New York City, Howard Allen Bridgman in New England had observed that “the mainstay of the modern church is its consecrated women,”⁸² and therefore “the world gets the idea that the church of God is, to a very great extent, an army of women.”⁸³ The world had the correct impression: “three fourths of the Sabbath congregations and nine tenths of the mid-week assembly”⁸⁴ were women. The YMCA discovered “that only one young man in twenty in this country is a church member, and that seventy-five out of every hundred never attend church.”⁸⁵

So it was that the men of the century 1830-1930, who saw the United States transformed from an agrarian republic into an industrial and commercial nation, distanced themselves from Christianity. Evelyn A. Kirkley writes of the Freethinking movement in the 1880s that “men constituted 70 to 80 percent of this movement. . . . To Freethinkers, that 70 to 80 percent of church members were women while the same percentage of atheists were men clearly demonstrated men’s superior reasoning and intellectual capabilities.”⁸⁶

Nineteenth-Century America

Yet industrialization alone cannot have been the sole cause of male retreat from Christianity because the situation was the same at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Frances Trollope, mother of the novelist Anthony Trollope, lived in Cincinnati for two years in the late 1820s. She found trans-Appalachian America barbaric, and

cast her acute eye, and exercised her sharp tongue, on the religious customs of the new country. She was appalled by the revivalistic atmosphere that pervaded Protestantism, and she also declared “I never saw, or read, of any country where religion had so strong a hold upon the women, or a slighter hold upon the men.”⁸⁷

Trollope was correct in her observation. Even in the nineteenth century the church was a largely female institution. Throughout the nineteenth century, women outnumbered men in the churches by about two to one, which seems to have been the ratio even in the Second Great Awakening. In 1833, the Universalist Sebastian Streeter claimed that “Christian churches are composed of a great disproportion of females.”⁸⁸ In 1859, another minister, William Gage, said of the Unitarians, “the church is almost without male members.”⁸⁹ Opponents of revivalism claimed that it “appealed to the weak-minded portion of the community, and while proponents of revival rejected this conclusion, they did not dispute assertions about the sex ratio.”⁹⁰ Throughout the nineteenth century, and seemingly more so at the end than at the beginning, the church was for women. “The nineteenth century minister moved in a world of women. He preached mainly to women; he administered what sacraments he performed largely for women; he worked not only for them but with them, in mission and charity work of all kinds.”⁹¹ When the founder of Wellesley College, Henry Fowler Durant, left the bar to become a minister and “forsook the conflict of the court to work for the Lord, he increasingly entered the realm of women.”⁹² Orestes Brownson complained about the “female religion” that Protestantism had become.⁹³ Post-Civil War observers in the evangelical South lamented that “the altars of our churches are pitiably devoid of young men,” “there has scarce been a religious young man here in years,” and there are but few married men who attend services at any of our churches.”⁹⁴ The women both dominated the membership rolls and the activities of the southern churches.⁹⁵

This was true not only of liberal Unitarians. Revivalists such as the famous Charles Grandison Finney who preached in the Second Great Awakening found a feminized church in the 1830s: “Women composed the great majority of members in all churches. They

dominated revivals and praying circles, pressing husbands, fathers, and sons towards conversion and facilitating every move of the evangelist.”⁹⁶ In her study of revivals in Oneida, New York, in the 1810s, Mary P. Ryan mentions “the conspicuous absence of men in the churches of Oneida County.”⁹⁷ In one Presbyterian church, “prior to 1814, 70 percent of those admitted to full communion in the society were females.”⁹⁸ Nevertheless, during revivals the proportion of male converts increased.⁹⁹

Colonial and Revolutionary America

Perhaps the American Revolution caused a marked decline in interest in religion among men because “republicanism meant the freedom *not to defer* to traditional hierarchical authority, whether in the form of king, community scion, or church.”¹⁰⁰ But interest in religion had been weak among men from almost the very beginnings of the English settlements.

In his study of Congregationalism, Richard D. Shields states that 59 percent of all new members from 1730 to 1769 were women.¹⁰¹ The figures for southern churches were the same. In 1792, “southern women outnumbered southern men in the churches (65 to 35) though men outnumbered women in the general population (51.5 to 48.5).”¹⁰² During the First Great Awakening, which began in 1797, women continued to dominate church life: “Ministers wrote that converts were usually young, most often between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five, either single or married but without children, and predominantly female.”¹⁰³

Such revivals invariably began with women. They “were initiated by the conversion of a young woman or of a group of young women, and often the efforts of such women were opposed by men,”¹⁰⁴ especially young men, who, “according to the accounts of ministers, often ridiculed converts, refused to attend church meetings, and conspired to break up revivals in progress.”¹⁰⁵ Family men, fathers and husbands, wanted to have nothing to do with these revivals, and though they “tried to prevent their wives or daughters from attending church,” they “were eventually brought into the church themselves

by these women.”¹⁰⁶ Such pressure sometimes worked, but did not win the long-term affection of men for the church. Female zeal later found outlets in such crusades as the temperance movement, in which female church members allied with ministers to conquer male vices, to the continued annoyance of men, who chafed under the reins of the alliance of women and the clergy.

Some New England churches have registers of members extending back to their foundations in the seventeenth century. These registers are lists of adults who joined the church, and therefore provide evidence for a public commitment to religion. From the very beginning women constituted the majority of members. At the beginning of the European settlement of North America, the Puritans noticed that their churches, voluntary associations of the saved, were predominantly women. Cotton Mather was the first English American to notice and comment that there were more women than men in Christian congregations: “I have seen it without going a Mile from home, That in a Church of Three or Four Hundred Communicants, there are but a few more than One Hundred Men, all the Rest are Women, of whom Charity will Think no Evil.”¹⁰⁷ Even this ratio is misleading, because there were more men than women in colonial society.¹⁰⁸ Studies of parish records confirm Mather’s impression: “One group—the women of the community—was especially active religiously and came more and more to predominate numerically in the church.”¹⁰⁹ As it is in the twentieth century in America, so it was in the seventeenth: “Women proved superior in almost every external measure of religious life.”¹¹⁰ The pattern that was established then has continued to the present, through all changes in government and through the change from an agrarian to an industrial, urban economy.

Modern England

The Britain from which the American colonists came has long shown a similar lack of male interest in religion. Of the late twentieth-century church, Grace Davie asks, “why do women so often predominate in the pews?”¹¹¹ Men may be, for a while, the majority of

the clergy, but the laity are predominantly female. Of a typical rural churchgoer, it could be said “*she* would probably be age 45 and belong to one of the higher social classes”; the corresponding non-churchgoer, would be “a young man ... of the lower social classes.”¹¹² Moreover, the difference has been growing: “The imbalance between the sexes ... is becoming more rather than less marked in contemporary society.”¹¹³ The differences in the 1979 and 1989 censuses reveal this pattern: “In 1979 the proportion of male churchgoers was 45 percent, in 1989 in England it had dropped to 42 percent, nearer to the 1982 Welsh figure of 38 percent and the 1984 Scottish figure of 37 percent.”¹¹⁴ The difference can be traced back as far as there are statistics for church involvement—not only a difference in outward observance, but in belief: “The nature ... of women’s beliefs is different from that of their male counterparts.”¹¹⁵ Far more women than men subscribe to basic Christian beliefs¹¹⁶ and the image of the God in whom they believe differs: “Women, if they are asked to describe the God in whom they believe, concentrate rather more on the God of love, comfort and forgiveness than on the God of power, planning and control. Men, it seems, do the reverse.”¹¹⁷ A 1989 poll in Great Britain revealed numerous differences between men and women, not only in religious practice, but in beliefs, though men and women identified themselves as members of denominations about equally.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, women’s greater religiosity appears somewhat free-floating. It makes them more orthodox Christians, but it also makes them more open to alternative religions. The same poll shows that 44 percent of women believe in astrology, an irrationality in which only 30 percent of men indulge.¹¹⁹

A 1951 study of churches in York showed “57 percent more women in nonconformist churches, 48 percent more in the Church of England and 23 percent more in the Roman Catholic churches.”¹²⁰ For more personal religious activities, which are less susceptible to social pressure, the difference is even greater. Studies in the 1940s showed that for weekly attendance at church the ratio of women to men was 1.5 to one and for quarterly attendance, 1.25 to one.¹²¹ Among English adults in 1955, the ratio of women who prayed daily to men who prayed daily was 1.87 to one.¹²² About the

same number of men and women claimed to believe that God exists, but men were less orthodox than women in the specifics of their beliefs. The ratio of women believers in a personal God to male believers was 1.5 to one, the ratio of women who believe that Jesus was the Son of God to men who believe that doctrine was 1.54 to one.¹²³

In the 1920s in working-class London, as in Spain, going to church was for women, and men helped keep their masculine reputation intact by staying away from church: “Male bravado precluded anything as effeminate as going to church.”¹²⁴ The statistics from a church census in London at the beginning of the twentieth century moved the Reverend J. E. Watts of Ditchfield to remark that there was all too much truth in “the assertion that the Church is only for women and children.” In London proper, during the morning services, there were 133,322 men and 180,513 women present, for the evening services, 133,305 men and 232,486 women. The same pattern was found in Greater London.¹²⁵

Within the Church of England attendance by men varied according to the ideological posture of the parish. The Anglo-Catholics were the most feminized.¹²⁶ The enemies of the high church movement claimed that the Tractarian cleric “rules with despotic sway over ever so many young ladies, not a few old ones, some sentimental young gentlemen, and one or two old men in their dotage.”¹²⁷ The Anglo-Catholics were sensitive to “the scoffing censure that our churches are filled and our Altars crowded with women.”¹²⁸ But the same censure could, as we have seen, be applied at all churches in London: “In the Borough of Westminster, for example, in the morning congregations at two ritualist strongholds, St. Barnabas, Pimlico, and St. Thomas, Regent Street, women made up 75 percent and 71 percent, respectively, of the adults present, compared with 66 percent of the adults in all Church of England congregations in the borough.”¹²⁹ The difference in the percentage of women was slight, but it was noticed, as was the presence of “sentimental young men.”

In the mid-nineteenth century the evangelical clergyman John Angell James had remarked that “a very large proportion of the members of all Christian churches are females, and young females

too.”¹³⁰ The predominance of women in the Church of England has apparently been of long standing. In the sixteenth century Richard Hooker had remarked that women in particular were “propense and inclinable to holiness.”¹³¹ Presumably English men, in Hooker’s experience, were not.

Germanic and Latin Countries

Catholic Latin countries have even fewer males in church than do churches in northern Europe, although whether this is because French, Spanish, and Italian men are less “propense and inclinable to holiness” than Irishmen or Germans is open to question, for German men are not especially religious. In the Federal Republic, the churches are “women’s companies.”¹³² In Latin countries the situation is simply worse. The Jesuit James Fichter states that “South American males, and also those of France and of Italy are notoriously poor church participants.”¹³³ South America has for a long time had a culture in which men stayed away from church.¹³⁴ How far back this male lack of interest goes is not clear, but at least since the wars of independence from Spain (and probably earlier) men have left the church to women. Catholic priests who have worked in Latin America have been disturbed by the lack of men, low even by North American standards: “Few Latin American men are seen in church ... the index of religious practice for men is very, very low.”¹³⁵ In Latin America there is “a long standing tradition among the Spanish clergy that women are more religious; priests seem to write off men as rather hopeless, and concentrate on women, particularly on the younger women, ‘*the virgenes*’ who are to be the ‘guardians of purity’ and the ‘preservers of the faith.’”¹³⁶ Latin American men may consider themselves Catholics, and may be willing to support the church, but they leave the outward manifestations of their religion to women and priests.

Spanish men also leave the church largely to women, which suggests that the Hispanic attitude toward religion antedates the Spanish colonization of the Americas in the sixteenth century. In a Spanish village, even a conservative and Catholic one, religion is an

affair for women and priests. For example, in 1896 in a small city in Spain, Belmonte de los Caballeros, the parish records show that 443 Catholics had made their Easter duty, and 232 had failed to do so (151 men and 81 women did not fulfill this elementary obligation).¹³⁷ In the 1960s average mass attendance in this city was 55 percent, “39 percent among the men and some 71 percent among the women.”¹³⁸ Stanley Brandes writes that his experience in the town of Monteros confirms the impression that men are less religious: “Within all segments of society, men are the religious sceptics, women the religious supporters.”¹³⁹ The wife is not the head of the family, but she “assumes control of all affairs pertaining to the spiritual well-being of the household: the masses for the dead, the children’s prayers, the husband’s annual communion, and the negotiations with the important divine figures.”¹⁴⁰ “The woman is expected to be more religious than the man and to fulfill her religious duties more punctiliously. The wife/mother has to elicit blessings for her children and husband by her prayers. She puts pictures and images of her favorite saints in places of honor, and at times she may force the husband not to overlook his religious obligations. If a child is ill she, never the father, will light small lamps or candles before the image of the Virgin or will recite the Rosary or commission a holy hour.”¹⁴¹ For a man to be outstandingly religious is considered shameful. A man is humiliated, *pasar verguenza*, if he is in debt, or “if he is seen in church holding a rosary, or sitting in the front benches in church.”¹⁴² A man can be a Catholic without disgrace, but to be outwardly religious is incompatible with masculinity. This attitude, as we have seen, also affects the Spanish layman’s attitude to the only group of men who are more religious even than the women, that is, the priests.

In France, as Ruth Graham observes, somewhat ambiguously, in her essay on the relationship of women and clergy in the French Enlightenment, “At the beginning of the eighteenth century, men dominated religious life in France; at the end of the century, women were by far the greater number of the faithful.”¹⁴³ Men may have been in leadership positions at the beginning of the century, and the French revolution, like the American one, may have even further alienated men from the church, but probably women were the more

numerous and more devout members of French congregations throughout the eighteenth century, although the proportion of women in congregations may have varied. Although the convulsionaries of St. Medard may not have been representative, still, as Graham notes, in 1731-32 the reports were that three-fourths of the convulsionaries were women.¹⁴⁴

In modern France as well the church is the domain of women. In the 1980s, 84 percent of catechists were women.¹⁴⁵ This is the situation after France had recovered from its bout of extreme anti-clericalism in the nineteenth century. The difference between men and women had grown less in the mid-twentieth century, in part because more men were going to church, and in part because fewer women were going to church.¹⁴⁶ Church surveys in the 1930s point to a predominance of women. In the parish of St. Pierre in Arras 20 to 30 men, 70 to 80 women attended mass;¹⁴⁷ in the communes of Sillé-le-Guillaume and Pontvallain, 1,300 men and 2,300 women made their Easter duty (confessed and received communion).¹⁴⁸ St. Claude, a center of practicing Catholicism, had about 100,000 in its rural parishes. Of the men, 32 percent made their Easter duty (*pascalisant*) and 24 percent attended mass (*messes*); of the women 60 percent made their Easter duty and 44 percent attended mass. Even in parts of France not subjected to severe secularization, the disparity between the sexes is great. As the sociologist le Bras says, "One will notice the great number of those making their Easter duty and the difference between the sexes."¹⁴⁹ In Pithiviers, more famous for its pastry than its piety and "destitute of religious ardor," at Easter there were 370 men and 1,125 women in church; at Sunday mass, 192 men and 1,064 women.¹⁵⁰ More French men than women never went to church. Of those men and women who were believers, women were more regular churchgoers than men.

The situation was even worse in the nineteenth century when anti-clericalism was in full swing. In 1858 the rector of Montpellier lamented that "religious duties are almost completely neglected by the men or practiced only for appearance sake. Generally only women observe their duties."¹⁵¹ He said this because only 15 percent of the men made their Easter duty. In 1863, 16 percent of the men

and 57 percent of the women of Marseilles made their Easter duty; in Toulon 8 to 10 percent were practicing. In 1877, in the western part of the diocese of Orleans, only 4.7 percent of the men made their Easter communion, although 26 percent of the women did.¹⁵²

The Catholic Church in France has maintained its presence in society through the influence of women.¹⁵³ This strategy has even affected the teaching of doctrine. Though the Church had always condemned contraception, in France even peasants practiced coitus interruptus to limit the division of their inheritance. Acting on the advice of Alphonse de Ligouri, confessors decided that women were not guilty if their husbands practiced this form of contraception. This decision was based on a fear that rigorism would alienate women and the Church would lose all influence in French society. In 1842 the Trappist (and doctor) Debryne argued against a rigorist position on the use of contraception: “One should give serious attention to this; that one should not alienate women through an imprudent rigor; the matter is one of immense importance. The coming generation is in the hands of women, the future belongs to her.... If the woman gets away from us [the *us* seems to be his priest-readers] with her everything will disappear and vanish into the abyss of atheism—faith, morality, and our whole civilization.”¹⁵⁴

This clerical focus on women irritated men. In 1845 Jules Michelet complained that Frenchwomen were under the thumbs of the clergy, who realized that “the direction, the government of women, is the vital point of ecclesiastical power, which they will defend to the death.”¹⁵⁵ The Jesuits, according to Michelet, had “a great attempt to fasten on the man through the woman and on the woman through the child.”¹⁵⁶ An 1876 diocesan report in Orleans complained that attendance among women was declining “but above all because of the bad influence of their husbands.”¹⁵⁷ These husbands followed the orders of “Sociétés secrètes” (“secret societies,” no doubt Freemasons) that “it was necessary to forbid all communication with the priest.”¹⁵⁸ Nevertheless, many French men approved of religion for women as a guarantor of marital fidelity and encouraged women to go to church.¹⁵⁹

Wherever Western Christianity has spread, the church is femi-

nized. Rosemary Reuther observes: "In Germany, France, Norway, and Ireland women are 60 to 65 percent of the active churchgoers. In Korea, India, and the Philippines, women are 65 to 70 percent of the active churchgoers."¹⁶⁰ This pattern seems to hold true in Western and Central Europe. The political upheavals in Eastern Europe, first Naziism and then Communism, have disorganized church life to an extreme and have prevented any studies of patterns of church attendance. Czechs and Slovaks to whom I have spoken indicate that in those countries the pattern is Western: more women than men attend church, and religion is felt to be somehow feminine. Poles, on the other hand, indicate that Poland seems to follow the Eastern pattern: men and women attend church equally, and there is no sense that religion is somehow proper to women. Factory workers in Solidarity were not embarrassed to display their piety publicly. The fusion of religion and national feeling is connected with this high male participation in church life, but it is unclear whether it is a cause or a consequence.

The exceptions to the general pattern of feminization of religious life are worth noting: the Eastern Orthodox (perhaps), the Jews (definitely) and non-Christian religions. In America, in comparison even to the Jews, "Muslims, adherents of Eastern religions, agnostics and religious 'Nones' have even more unbalanced sex ratios: almost two males for every female in each group. In contrast to the sex ratio among black Christians, only 36 percent of black Muslim and 40 percent of black religious 'Nones' are women."¹⁶¹ The pattern is found in England as well. In contrast to the feminized congregations among all major Christian denominations documented by the census taken early this century, the ratio of men to women in synagogues was over three to one.¹⁶² There is something about Christianity, especially Western Christianity, that drives a wedge between the church and men who want to be masculine.