

Hovland, Ingie. 2014. Review of *Why are Women More Religious than Men?* by Marta Trzebiatowska and Steve Bruce. In *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29(1), 152-153.

Marta Trzebiatowska and Steve Bruce. *Why Are Women More Religious Than Men?* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012. 205 pages. ISBN 978-0-19-960810-2.

Marta Trzebiatowska and Steve Bruce, sociologists at the University of Aberdeen, begin this book by providing statistics to document their initial conundrum, namely women's greater religiosity in the twentieth-century Western world, mainly the UK and the USA. The next eight chapters each deal with possible reasons for this puzzle.

Women's greater religiosity, the authors suggest, is not caused by women being more religiously conservative, and as evidence they present descriptions of a range of new religious movements in the UK and USA that were initiated or joined by women (chapter 2). Women's religious involvement may be an extension of their caring and emotional work, a theme first presented in relation to spirit mediums in the UK and USA (chapter 3). Similarly, women's greater participation in the New Age movement, mainly in the UK, may be an extension of women's greater interest in health and well-being in general (chapter 4). Chapter 5 presents summaries of a few studies on women in conservative religious settings – Evangelical Christians and Orthodox Jews in the US, and Pentecostal Christians in Colombia and South Africa – highlighting ways in which women conform to, ignore, or draw out benefits from their religions' overarching patriarchal framework. The authors then suggest that women's greater religiosity is perhaps linked to the fact that women, on the whole, have more to do with birth, child-rearing, illness and death, and therefore have more opportunities to come into contact with religious reflection, rituals, and representatives (chapter 6). In Chapter 7 the authors reject the notion that women are more religious because they are more risk-averse, especially in those Western societies where irreligion is no longer considered risky. In Chapter 8 they consider three orthodox religious contexts – Muslim women in the UK and in Lebanon, and Jewish women in Israel – and conclude that women are more religious in these contexts because they are required to take on religious commitments on behalf of others (mainly men) and to embody conservative sexual codes. Finally, they argue that the process of secularization in the West has impacted the public sphere first, and since men are more implicated in the public sphere than women, they have turned away from religion sooner than women. It is only a matter of time, the authors argue, before women become equally secularized (chapter 9). In conclusion, the authors propose that women's greater religiosity is due to “the sum of small differences” (p. 170), with the uneven gendered impacts of secularization being the most important.

Throughout the book it is clear that the authors wish to reach beyond an academic audience, and mentions of methodology or theoretical orientation are kept to a minimum and presented in simple terms. At times, I wondered if perhaps these were too simple. For example,

the authors refer to statistics that show that Jewish men score higher on religious markers than women, but they then choose to present Jewish women as more religious than men because of their “secondary” religious behavior, such as cooking (p. 142). While I agree with the authors’ underlying concern to make women’s work visible, it seems to me that a more complex methodological story might perhaps have been told here, and elsewhere.

In parts I found the book very enjoyable to read, especially in the early chapters on new religious movements and spirit mediums. At other times I missed the deeper scholarly discussion that these authors are undoubtedly also capable of, perhaps especially in the chapter on Muslim and Jewish women, which seemed somewhat tacked on, and in the chapter on secularization, which failed to convince me, mainly because of the authors’ lack of sustained engagement with their critics. In response, for example, to the criticism that the secularization thesis takes the masculine point of view as normative, the authors respond that the term “normative” is irrelevant since they are not writing moral philosophy, and that ““point of view’ ... is neither here nor there” (p. 151). Likewise, they mention the criticism by “some feminists” that the public/private divide is problematic, only to dismiss this in a footnote without any reference to the work of the “feminists” in question (p. 197 n1). For readers such as myself who are interested in these and other current debates in the field of gender and religion, this may lead to a sense that something is missing. But for readers who agree with Trzebiatowska and Bruce’s positivist or “Popperian view” (p. 198 n1), this will not be a problematic aspect of the study.

The book is, in sum, a stimulating stab at drawing up a map of the parts of the literature that the authors find interesting. It is a light, quick read, and is refreshingly well-written and well-edited. Even though I disagree in part with the authors’ approach and argument, I did find their overarching theme of “the sum of small differences” to be a helpful heuristic device, which I will no doubt refer to in the future.