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## ***Why Are Most Churchgoers Women? A Literature Review***

**Tony Walter\***

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One of the most obvious things about most churches is that they attract more women than men. Why is this?

A convincing answer is long overdue, not least because the kind of people you might expect to ask this question have not been asking it.

*Christian feminists* have not addressed this question. Their priority is to fight male domination within the church: they are concerned with why men dominate in the chancel, not why women predominate in the pews. But it seems to me—as a fellow traveller with feminists—that the question of why women fill our churches must be addressed if one is to flesh out/develop/assess feminist critiques of the church. If, as radical feminists claim, Christianity is bad for women, then why does it appeal more to women than to men? A contrast may be made here with feminist critiques of the family, which have been complemented by historical, psychological and sociological studies which show precisely how it is that women choose to enslave themselves in an institution that oppresses them. But comparable research has not been done on why women choose to worship in a patriarchal church—and without it, we are left without any idea of the mechanism by which people allow themselves to be enslaved by religious patriarchy.

For reformist Christian feminists who wish to improve the standing of women within the church, a first step must surely be to discover why women are filling the pews in the first place? And to know why so many women actually like being church members will surely help us understand why so many of them are resistant to Christian feminist ideas?

Sociologists are a second group who might have addressed themselves to the question, but who haven't. They have long been fascinated by religion, but have largely ignored the local church's manifestly feminine nature. In the 1970s, sociology was rudely awakened by feminism, which pointed out that people's life chances, behaviour and attitudes are profoundly affected by their gender, so sociologists began to look at gender—in almost every field other than religion, where research specifically into gender has been minimal and where textbooks on the

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sociology of religion still contain but a derisory two or three pages on gender.

Amazingly, few sociologists have asked ordinary churchgoers, female or male, why they go to church, or why they believe. Much more attention has been directed to studying esoteric sects—the assumption seems to be that worshipping at the local church is totally normal

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\* I am grateful to Shirley Dex for first raising the question; to members of the Sociology of Religion Study Group of the British Sociological Association, to whom an early draft was presented; and to my students at London Bible College and at Trinity College, Bristol.

behaviour and unworthy of research (in fact, of course, it is highly abnormal behaviour in modern Britain), while joining the Moonies or the Children of God demands investigation. The consequence is that there is very little research data on why ordinary people go to ordinary churches and why ordinary people become ordinary Christians.

Male clergy, both Catholic and Protestant, form a third group who have been interested, not so much in why so many women go to church but why so few men do. Male clergy have been asking this, on and off, for centuries. A recent example is Jim Smith, evangelist with the Church Pastoral Aid Society, associate of Billy Graham, and author of books such as *Manhunt* (1985). Male clerics of this kind have not been noted for serious scholarship, but they certainly have some useful insights. In general, though, the churches have been less exercised over why they fail to reach men than over why they fail to reach the working class. This was, for example, part of the remit of the recent Church of England report, *Faith in the City* (1985).

What then is there to go on? There is a certain amount of useful data from North American studies of church life, but in Britain even the basic data on precisely how many more women than men attend church is thin, not least because most churches do not publish membership or attendance figures that separate men from women. The Bible Society and MARC have, however, recently published the results of national surveys that do differentiate men from women. The evidence will be brought up to date for England shortly, following the English Church Census carried out by MARC in October 1989.

Beyond this kind of survey data, which tells us little more than the gender ratios in various churches, the data gets decidedly patchy. The best data comes from anthropological studies of Mediterranean peasant communities (Christian 1972; Pitt-Rivers 1971; Pina-Cabral 1986; du Boulay 1974).

There are several theories as to why women may be more religious, or churchy, or spiritual, or more likely to become Christians. These theories help explain why a particular church at a particular time appeals to women, but there is as yet no generally accepted theory of why women in general seem to be more religious than men. What is distinctly lacking is material by ordinary women—and men—telling us why they go to church. We now have accounts by Christian feminists telling us what they don't like about the church; and statistics gathered by usually male social scientists revealing that many women presumably do like going to church; but nothing from the lips of those women

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themselves. They are virtually invisible in the research literature.

In this article, I will (1) summarize the evidence concerning gender ratios, (2) list the main theories I have come across, (3) address some theological implications.

## EVIDENCE

Throughout the modern world, *more women than men go to church*. In England, out of every 100 church attenders, 55 are women and 45 men (in England generally, women outnumber men slightly, 51:49). The difference is most marked in liberal nonconformist churches, such as Methodist (60:40) and United Reformed (57:43), which tend to lack males aged 20-40.

Evangelical churches have a more even balance, with Baptists 57:43 and independent churches 53:47. The Church of England has a ratio of 55:45, and the Roman Catholics 54:46 (Nationwide Initiative in Evangelism 1980). The ratios in Wales (61:39) and Scotland (Protestant 63:37, Catholic 57:43) are more marked (Brierley & Evans 1983; Brierley & Macdonald 1985). The 1984 Mission England was particularly attractive to females, with a ratio of 63:37—nearly two to one—among those who went forward (Back 1985). In the USA, the patterns are somewhat different, with the more evangelical churches being particularly attractive to women (Pentecostals 2:1, Baptists 3:2).

One possible explanation for the predominance of women over men in some churches is age: a disproportionate number of churchgoers are elderly, and since there are more elderly women than men in the population at large, we would expect more of them in church. Although more males than females are conceived, the ratio of live females to live males increases steadily with age, so a church that is equally attractive to both males and females will contain more females the older the average age of the congregation. A statistical examination of how much of the differences in church attendance may be explained by this has yet to be done.

The dimension of religious life where the differences between women and men seem to be biggest is *private prayer* (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi 1975: ch 5). This has caused several commentators to wonder whether men engage in religious practices when they are public, but tend not to bother with private devotions when there is no social pressure. Islam and Judaism involve men more than women, doubtless because religion is still part of public life, which is dominated by men. It may well have been—though good data is difficult to find—that in pre-industrial Britain, when churchgoing was more of a public duty, men went in large numbers as the representative of the household; now that faith is more a private choice of the individual, an optional leisure activity, the men seem to have dropped away (McLeod 1981). It is, of course, impossible to estimate from behaviour such as going to church or praying daily who might truly be Christians in the eyes of God, but the fact that the more

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private the devotion, the more likely it is to be a woman who is on her knees, does strongly suggest that female Christians outnumber male Christians even more than female churchgoers outnumber male churchgoers.

The *content* of women's and men's religious beliefs vary. Cox (1967) and Wright & Cox (1967) found teenage girls more likely to describe God as loving, comforting and forgiving, while boys tend to view him as a supreme power, a driving force and a planner and controller. A study by Simmons & Walter (1988) of two large evangelical Anglican churches found forgiveness important to a substantial minority of women but to hardly any men, who tended to see God as providing meaning rather than forgiveness. Some women described Christ simply as 'everything' to them, while even the most devout men always qualified and compartmentalized their faith. A similar, unpublished, survey in 1989 of 159 students, spouses, and faculty at London Bible College was carried out as an assignment by student Steve Page. He, too, discovered the importance of Christ as 'everything' to a group of women; and also discovered a group of men who saw God as an authority figure (Lord, Master, Boss), whereas very few women used such terms. This may be consistent with the findings of various researchers (eg Yeaman 1987) that men—in various religions—like to see God in hierarchical terms, as a power over them; while women tend to experience God as uniting them with the universe (as with some of the medieval mystics).

I know of no figures relating to the Third World, but the impression of my overseas students is that the picture is similar. In countries where whole households convert, it seems that it is often the women who continue as practising Christians—perhaps praying and going to church on their husbands' behalf (cf Reed 1978).

## THEORIES

Why are there these differences between men and women? Despite local variations, why does all the evidence point to women being more religious than men?

Most people surely go to church, or become Christians, for spiritual reasons—they are searching for God, they want something extra in their lives. But why do women do or experience these things, or express them, more than men? Spiritual explanations do not help us very much at this point, but it is surely worth asking what it means to be a woman or a man, to see if this can shed some light on the question. This is where the social sciences may be of some use.

In the review which follows, I identify eleven social scientific theories that purport to account for why women are more religious than men. I will start with some psychological theories, then move on to more sociological ones, in the light of which we can reconsider theological issues such as liberation, election and judgement.

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### Psychological theories

#### *Guilt*

In general, women experience more guilt feelings than do men (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi 1975: 77, Gray 1971, Suziedelis & Potvin 1981). If one of the main purposes of Christianity is to assuage guilt, then we would expect women to be more responsive because they are more aware of a need for forgiveness. And indeed, in several studies (Cox 1967, Simmons & Walter 1988), females are more likely than males to stress—or even mention—God's forgiveness.

The anthropologist William Christian (1972: 130-161), who studied the Catholic faith of a remote Spanish valley, suggests it is not quite this simple. It is not just that women are naturally more prone to guilt feelings; Catholicism actively fosters guilt in women. The ideal woman, Mary, is both virgin and mother, and therefore an impossible model for women to follow. Catholic peasant women feel they have failed: as virgins they have not fulfilled themselves as women, as mothers they have lost their virginity. After the wedding, they cease to wear white, as though they are now polluted, and religion henceforth for them is largely a matter of seeking purification. For the men in this community, their daily work is profane and non-religious, but it is not impure and polluting in the way childbearing is for women. Men therefore don't need religion in the way women do (see Douglass 1970 on personal pollution).

Christian feminists such as Rosemary Reuther (1974: 89-116, 150-183) have argued that this kind of process has been widespread in Christendom. Under the misleading influence of Greek ideas, Christianity has tended to associate the body with evil, and the mind with goodness. Since women have often been seen as more earthy, more influenced by their

bodies, many of the church fathers believed women to be more inherently evil than men and more in need of salvation. In so far as women themselves have also believed this, they may well have sought salvation more earnestly than men.

### *Anxiety*

If Christian faith assuages and/or encourages guilt, it also provides comfort against anxiety and existential terror (Tillich 1952; Berger 1969). Gray (1971) and Garai & Scheinfeld (1968) point out that women generally have higher levels of fear than do men. There are some rather obvious reasons for this: women are more directly involved in the inherently scary businesses of birth and death, and it is only in this century that birth rates and child mortality have declined sufficiently to ensure that mothers can dare hope to get through a year without having either to give birth or to bury a child. Christian (1972: 133-134) notes that most pilgrimages in his Spanish valley were made by women, and usually involved a promise of the kind 'Lord, if you make my sick child

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well, I will walk barefoot to such and such a shrine.' Perhaps because of this acquaintance with birth, sickness and death, women are more aware of our basic human frailty. Men have comparable familiarity with sickness and death only on active service in wartime—a time when men too are more likely to turn to religion. What motherhood does for women, perhaps only war can do for men?

### *God as father figure*

Jesus taught his disciples to address God as father, and many believers see him as some kind of father. Central to Freud's theory of religion is that God is a projected father figure, and subsequent psychologists have believed that children prefer the opposite-sex parent—from which it follows that girls should be more concerned than boys with a deity presented as a fatherly male (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi 1975: 77). Other Freudians see religion as sublimated sexuality, not necessarily tied to a father figure; Carroll (1983) suggests that adoration of Mary could well have this aspect for many men.

This approach obviously has difficulty accounting for why recently it has been largely *women* who have wanted to call God *mother*. On the other hand, to date, this is only a very small proportion of female churchgoers, far outnumbered by those who continue to address God as male. Freudian theories are notoriously difficult to test, and I personally see more mileage in exploring psychological theories focusing not on sublimated sexuality but on dependence.

### *Dependence*

Colette Dowling's book *The Cinderella Complex* (1982) is not ostensibly about religion at all, yet begins with a chapter entitled *The Wish To Be Saved*. Dowling is somewhat American and anti-Christian in her idolatry of the independence of the individual, but she does point to an important difference between men and women in our society:

There are thousands upon thousands of women like me... who have not been able to face up to the adult reality that we, alone, are responsible for ourselves. We may pay lip service to this idea, but inside, we do not accept it. Everything about the way we were raised told us we would be *part* of someone else—that we would be protected, supported, buoyed up by wedded happiness until the day we died... We may venture out on our own for a while. We may go away to school, work, travel; we may even make good money, but underneath it all there is a *finite* quality to our feelings about independence. Only

hang on long enough, and some day someone will come along to rescue you from the anxiety of authentic living. (The only saviour the *boy* learns about is himself.)

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If Dowling's analysis is correct (even if her evaluation is flawed), it is clear that women are set up not only for marriage to a husband but also for marriage to a saviour Christ. I do not have any figures, but my impression of the suburban middle class Protestant churches that I have attended over the years is that they are populated by a particular kind of woman: young girls, widows, and wives often in unsatisfactory marriages—in other words, by women who have been socialized to be dependent on a male but have no male to be dependent on. So they turn to Christ. Eichenbaum & Orbach (1983) suggest that even in marriage the dependency needs of most British and North American women are not met.

This fits well with Bruce Reed's (1978) theory of religion as a process by which dependency needs are met. One weakness of Reed's book is that he seems to assume that we all have equal dependency needs; another is that he does not mention that most churchgoers are women, while Christ and most priests are men. But if we incorporate this into Reed's theory, we can apply the theory very well to those many female churchgoers whose dependency needs have not been met outside of the church. Catholics, of course, make all this explicit: they take St Paul's image of the whole church as the bride of Christ and apply it specifically to young women, especially those becoming nuns, and encourage them to see themselves—as individuals—married to Christ.

If women are brought up to be dependent, then men are brought up to be independent; if women tend to value relationships, men tend to value individual autonomy (Gilligan 1982)—in my view, equally unhealthy! Whereas a relationship with Christ may fulfil a woman's desire for relationship, it directly confronts a man's desire for independence. Taking up the cross, denying himself, and abasing himself before God is hardly the fulfilment of his masculinity!

This may help us interpret the finding in the London Bible College survey that 22% of the men, but only 6% of the women, said they valued God as 'lord', 'master', or 'boss'. LBC students are not typical of most Christians. They have consciously given themselves to service of God, and for a good number of the men this must have meant confronting the issue of who is in charge of their lives; if he were not willing to surrender his independence, a man would presumably not enter Bible college, and it therefore becomes a major part of his relationship with God. For many women, it may simply never have been an issue.

This issue may be particularly important in Latin countries which have a more macho culture than do we Anglo Saxons (Campbell 1964). There, the quintessence of manliness is fearlessness, readiness to defend one's pride and that of one's own family. Here we have pride, one of the seven deadly sins, elevated into an ideal! Male aggression and refusal to forgive hardly accord with Christian faith (McLeod 1981: 34).

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There are objections to this dependency theory of female spirituality. There is evidence that, in their own way, men also show a need to be dependent; they just don't acknowledge it. Maybe some men find worship and prayer a relief from the facade of autonomy and

competence that is normally expected of them? I know for myself that a church service is the most common public place for me to weep, and I can find this helpful.

The family plays several of the functions of religion, especially for women: it is a source of meaning and comfort, it is something for which people sacrifice themselves, it demands total commitment (Berger 1973). Just as I have proposed (Walter 1979) that in a secular society people may turn to the family as a substitute religion, so Glock *et al* (1967) have proposed that singles and widows without the benefits of family life may be more likely to turn to religion. The research that has subsequently been done in the USA to test this hypothesis has tended not to support it (Christiano 1986); I know of no comparable research in Britain. Things are, of course, complicated by those many churches that specifically woo families: the spinster who is attracted to dependence on God, but is put off by a church which so stresses family life that it ignores single women.

Finally, there is a chicken and egg problem. Do spinsters and widows come to, or continue in, faith because they lack any other secure male figure? Or is the gender imbalance in church caused by some other factor, leaving—in churches which stress marriage only to other believers—a surfeit of spinsters?

### **Deprivation-compensation theories**

Religion making up for lack of family love is one of a group of theories claiming that religion compensates for something the individual feels deprived of. Several such theories point not to psychological-emotional, but to socio-economic, deprivations—and to these I will now turn.

If women are more deprived than men, then we would expect them to be more religious. Jesus himself hinted at this when he said in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:3-11), 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth...' He seems to be saying that God has a special blessing for those who suffer.

#### *Material poverty*

The brunt of poverty is generally borne by women. It is women who have to clothe and feed their families while the men are away working in a Johannesburg gold mine or drinking the money away at The Dog and Whistle. Church membership often gives access to financial aid from a

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religious charity (McLeod 1981: 31), and there is always the chance that the prayers of a wife may help bring a dissolute husband into the fold and so end the family's material misery (Moore 1974: 146).

#### *Social life*

In many societies, men work outside the home and have a social life in, pub or cafe; women are often isolated within the home and deprived of friends. Moore describes the Methodist chapel in the coal mining villages of County Durham at the turn of the century as 'the only legitimate source of entertainment for the women' (1974: 130). Certainly my observation of Methodist churches today on both sides of the Atlantic is that they often play a role as a social club for women. McLeod (1981: 31), discussing the Victorian bourgeoisie, whose womenfolk



were decidedly housebound, writes: 'The Church was about the one place where jealous husbands could almost feel that their wives were safe-though the alleged talents of Catholic priests in seduction caused some anxieties.'

Roof (1978), however, in a review of North American social surveys, finds no evidence for this social club theory of female church attendance today. In Britain, I suspect things have changed a lot in this century. A whole host of organizations and leisure activities for women have emerged, from the Women's Institute to bingo to yoga to feminist consciousness raising groups, leaving only the pub and the football for many men. The kind of man who does not enjoy the pub or football may find it harder than many women to find a social life; Simmons & Walter (1988) found that in one thriving church full of young professionals it was men not women who said they went to this particular church for friendship.

Edward Bailey, an Anglican clergyman, has suggested to me that sometimes people go to church not for sociability but for privacy, to get away from a teeming household. In my own church, you see them at the 8am communion.

### *Status*

Women's all too frequent exclusion from better paid jobs, from political office, and from the public world generally, has tended to deprive them of social status. A religion which proclaims that all human beings are equally loved by God because they are all his children is more immediately attractive to those who are not accorded love or respect by the world.

Once inside the church, however, women may find themselves even more deprived of status and power vis-a-vis male members. As is all too often women's experience, the way out of one unpleasant situation itself involves yet more trials; there are no easy options. Lack of status within the church is indeed one reason for women leaving religious

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groups, sometimes to join more egalitarian religious sects such as the Quakers (Huber 1979) or in the nineteenth century the Theosophists (Burfield 1983).

Charismatic housechurches in Britain are unusual in attracting almost as many men as women (Walker 1985: 188). Typically, these churches attract both halves of a couple, not just the wife as in many of the older denominations; many housechurches also stress the authority of husband over wife. One wonders whether, in a general climate of uncertainty over family roles, these churches appeal particularly to couples who long for the security of fixed roles? This would certainly fit the status theory, which would predict that churches which go out of their way to teach the authority of ordinary men (not just priests and ministers) over ordinary women might well appeal to men rather more than do most churches.

I have considerable time for the status theory, but deprivation-compensation theories must be treated with caution (Roof 1978; Stark 1972). Many working class people in Britain are relatively deprived both materially and in terms of status, but are not noted for flocking to church—religious faith has to be culturally available as a plausible option before any deprivation-compensation theory can operate. This rather begs the question as far as women are concerned: why is it that women often see faith as an option, but other deprived groups—such as unemployed men—do not? Also, a statistical correlation between some form

of deprivation and Christian faith cannot explain that faith unless the person herself feels deprived; many conservative churchgoing women apparently do not.

### **Theories concerning women's roles**

A third set of theories focuses on the role of women as homemakers. In part, these overlap with some of the theories already mentioned.

#### *The privatisation of religion*

Before the modern era, men, women and children in Europe were to a large extent co-workers within a household-based economy. The industrial revolution took production out of the home and away from the small family farm, and into the factory. At first in the Lancashire cotton industry, the whole family would move into the factory to work together, but within a generation or two reformers were legislating for the women and children to return to the home—where they were now no longer able to earn a living, and were instructed instead to inhabit a world of family values. The woman was not only separated from those of the world of paid work, but actually urged to redeem her man by her purity once he returned from the depravities of factory, mine and pub. So the split between a public world of men (to do with work, reason, and

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politics), and a private world of women (to do with home, emotion, and holiness) was both enlarged and encouraged.

The result was not only the removal of women from the public sphere, but also the identification of religion with women and the home. Signs of this shift came as early as the seventeenth century, with puritan divines encouraging men into a range of earthly callings (Weber 1976), but instructing women that their calling was as a wife and mother. Historian David Stannard (1977) describes the situation in New England: 'As men were drawn into commercial life, religion became the province of women—and throughout the colonies, beginning first at the close of the seventeenth and continuing on into the eighteenth century, the proportion of women to men in church memberships rose to at least two, and often as high as three or four, to one.' Thus we have, in the words of Welter (1973), 'the feminization of American religion'.

(Once religion had been restricted to the private sphere, there was then a reaction in the early twentieth century, the social gospel. Only now are some churches attempting—with great difficulty—to reintegrate a private gospel and a social gospel.)

Earlier, I suggested that religion and the family have much in common, with similar values and occupying a similar niche in the social structure. What the historical analysis of this present section suggests is that this similarity between religion and the family is not inherent, but a historical product of the privatisation of religion at the beginning of the modern era. This would suggest that the predominance of women in church pews is essentially a modern, rather than a universal, phenomenon. Considerably more historical data on the male/female ratio of churches in previous centuries is needed to substantiate this, and such data will be very difficult to obtain.

#### *Child-rearing*

A more specific theory claims that church attendance is particularly associated with child-rearing, with the local church acting as a resource centre for those bring up children. But Roof (1978) found that, in the USA, men on becoming fathers increase their church attendance as much as do women on becoming mothers; that is, in the USA becoming a parent does increase church attendance, but this does not explain the greater religiosity of women vis-a-vis men. In Britain, we simply do not know.

### *Sacrifice*

More relevant may be the consciousness that goes with motherhood, and with womanhood generally. Women seem able to bear suffering more patiently than men, perhaps because they have had more practice at it: menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth are physical trials unknown to men. More than this, many women believe in an *ideology* of

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sacrifice—that it is a good thing that they sacrifice pleasures, careers, life itself, for the sake of pleasing their husband and bringing up their children. Women are brought up to sacrifice themselves for men and for children.

It has often been observed that when a woman commits herself, she really does. Apparently, aircraft hijack teams that include a female member are much more difficult to wear down than all-male hijack teams. Despite jibes and even psychological evidence that women are more easily persuadable than men, when it comes to real life and death commitment it's the woman who is less likely to waver. So when a woman hears the call to give up all and follow Christ, she may be emotionally prepared for such a life of sacrifice; a man isn't. Berger (1969) has commented on the masochistic element in some brands of Christianity and this could well fit female psyches better than male ones.

In passing, an observation. Feminists have often noted, with glumness, that men have a model to follow, Jesus, who was both perfect and an ordinary man, whereas Christian women have no divine woman to follow, only Mary whom they cannot possibly emulate. But many Christian women find in Jesus the perfect human being whom they can follow; moreover, in terms of today's images of masculinity and femininity, Jesus displayed rather more 'feminine' than 'masculine' characteristics: self-sacrificing, caring, sensitive, serene. Angela West (1983) brilliantly comments that a patriarchal God who appears on Earth as a male human being, who proceeds to side with the poor and oppressed, and then gets crucified for it, has in effect given up his patriarchal power. Jesus is the very denial of patriarchal man.

### *Workforce participation*

It has often been suggested that some women go to church because they are less likely to go out to work and therefore are protected from the profane values of the marketplace and of some workgroups (Luckmann 1967). In Australia, where there tends to be a tough, macho, anti-religious ethos in many workplaces, women who go out to work are as unlikely as men to go to church (deVaus & McAllister 1987), but it is hard to tell whether irreligious women are more happy to go out to work or whether the workplace makes them irreligious. In the USA, where religion is socially acceptable, going out to work is not associated with lack of religious faith (Ulbrich & Wallace 1984, deVaus 1984). I have yet to discover research documenting the situation in Britain.

Others have noted, following Gary Becker's (1981) economic theory of human behaviour, that since most women get paid less than men and perhaps value their time less, they have less to lose by investing in not this world but the next. This surely holds at least some water. Christianity stresses the eternal dimension, and has at times appealed most to those who have had little to lose by risking persecution and

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death—though at other times, it has certainly appealed to some who have a lot to lose.

Much modern Christianity, however, especially in the USA, offers earthly rather than heavenly rewards. 'Come to Jesus and He'll meet your every need', 'Be a true disciple and He'll make you a millionaire' (Walter 1985). This is very different from the early church which offered, alongside miracles of healing, floggings and persecution.

### A PLURAL, DYNAMIC PICTURE

The evidence, to date, is thin. We have little good research addressing the question of why most churchgoers are women, research that goes and asks ordinary believers about their faith. Many of the theories I have reviewed are to be found merely *en passant* in publications directed toward answering other questions.

We should not expect that any one theory will turn out to be correct in all situations. The predominance of women in, say, a Pentecostal church in Jamaica, a Baptist church in Bromley, and a Catholic church in Liverpool 8, is unlikely to be due to the same reasons. What I have done is outline some possible explanations, so that the reader can get some ideas to help in understanding the gender ratio in her own church.

One general historical trend may be discernible. Sociologists have often pointed to an oscillation in church history between the 'church' and the 'sect'. Put simply, the original, pure, Christian sect (like the early church) typically becomes within a generation or two a more organized and even bureaucratized church; deacons and other officials have to be appointed to run an increasingly complex organization; eventually ossification may set in. Then God speaks to a prophet or prophetess who leads a small band of true believers out of the ossified church to set up their own new, pure church. And so the process continues... Sociologists refer to the small, pure group as a sect, and to the more structured, older organization as a church—these terms referring essentially to forms of organization, not of theology (Wilson 1982: chs 4 & 5).

Rosemary Ruether (1979, 1984) has pointed out that women have often been greatly involved in renewal movements that lead to pure sect-like groupings. Since the leader's authority within the sect derives from the Holy Spirit, from inner conviction that she is a prophet, or from personal charisma—not from being an ordained priest nor from years of theological training—women have as much authority to lead the sect as do men. Just think of Mary Baker Eddy, or the leaders of many of the neo-Christian sects springing up around Africa now in the wake of de-colonization. (The current housechurch movement in the UK, all of whose original leaders were men, is an interesting exception.) Often women move out of the old church into the new sect so that they can use

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their gifts in a range of ministries, as with black pentecostalism or the Quakers. But as the sect in time becomes bureaucratized, and insists on training for its leaders, so typically the men have taken over, leaving women to occupy the pews. Ruether argues this happened in the early church as well as in subsequent renewals.

We should not assume, just because women in our own church may be passive or dependent, that they are in all churches—or always were in our own. This suggests that some of the theories I have reviewed (such as dependency theory) may apply more often to old established churches, while others (such as the status theory) may apply more to new sects in which women play a much more active part.

I suppose there is a place within the total church both for the structured church and, in certain circumstances, for the renewed sect—and thus for both dependency and leadership possibilities for both men and women. Ruether argues that women have always been among the church's chief prophets and that we need to rediscover this today. More important—and more difficult—is how to prevent patriarchy reasserting itself, once the prophetess has done God's renewing work.

## THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

### *Liberation*

Deprivation-compensation theories are compatible with much of Jesus' teaching. He specifically offered his good news to the poor and the oppressed: 'He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives... to set at liberty those who are oppressed.' (Luke 4:18) 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.' (Luke 18:25) If women are the poor and oppressed, then they are precisely the ones that Jesus came to set free, and we would expect to find them in church on their knees in greater numbers, and Christians would rejoice in this. They have been elected to the kingdom because they are poor in spirit.

But *are* women truly poor in terms of status and identity compared to men? It can be argued that God and/or nature have endowed women with unique functions—childbearing and suckling—which make them indispensable to human society, whereas—apart from copulation—men are entirely dispensable. The whole macho edifice, in this view, is an attempt by men to convince us that they are worth something. Men are the ones who have continually to prove themselves because so many appear to have no obvious worth of their own, and therefore are perhaps in particular need of a gospel that offers worth independent of works. But if they have condescended themselves, through the macho ethic, that they do not need salvation, then—from a Christian point of view—they are the losers twice over. The macho ethic of pride in independence

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thus appears as a Satanic device for keeping men from faith in Christ, while the feminine ethic appears as a schoolmistress to bring women to faith in Christ.

### *Election*

It seems likely from the evidence and from the theories reviewed that the macho ethic hinders men from worshipping God, while the feminine ethic almost encourages it. Christians who

believe the macho ethic and the feminine ethic to be God-given are faced with the tricky implication that more women than men would appear to have been predestined for salvation. Tricky, that is, for a church that is used to seeing men as spiritual leaders and women as temptresses. God is apparently not an equal opportunity employer; he has a bias to the women.

A different view, highly critical from a biblical point of view of the macho ethic with its stress on human pride and strength, might claim that God wants all people to worship him, but one particular group of people has developed a self-image that militates against this. St Paul (Romans chs 9-11) allowed for this possibility, when he described how in the time of the early church, the Jews—God's chosen people—had become blind to the gospel (Jewett 1985). He was not saying that each Jew as an individual was blind (clearly Paul himself came to see the light), but that there was something about them as a group that was blind. Far from being a reason for despising the Jews, the early church responded to this group rejection with sorrow, prayer and evangelism. Western men in the modern age could form a similar group.

The similarity may go even further. God specially chose the Children of Israel, expecting more of them than he did of the Gentiles. For those today who believe that the Bible gives a special authority and a special ministry to men, the rejection of Christ by men as a group is distinctly reminiscent of Israel. Those chauvinist Christian men who revel in what they believe to be their 'authority' would do well to ponder this.

#### *Evangelism*

Those who believe that all should have an equal opportunity to respond to the Christian gospel may be exercised about how to evangelize the recalcitrant men. There are two main approaches that those concerned with evangelism today take.

There are those who think the problem is that the church has become too effeminate, with wimpish clergy dressed up in frocks, and congregations dominated by women; most of a local church's organizations are oriented toward women and children, and men are loath to enter this female culture. If it is to attract more men, church life must become robust and masculine.

The other approach stresses that the macho culture of many men includes anti-Christian values that make it difficult for men to become

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committed Christians; it is secular male culture that needs to be challenged and changed, not female church culture.

Jim Smith seems to hedge his bets in his 1985 book, *Manhunt*. On the one hand, he seems to accept the cult of masculinity, aiming to show men how becoming a Christian is a brave, tough thing a man can be proud of. (Smith's passion to evangelize men seems to land him in a contradiction here.) On the other hand, he senses the weakness of the macho cult, that underneath it lies a vulnerability, but he seems reluctant to go the whole way in developing a Christian critique of the macho man and proclaiming to men that Jesus will not make them the men they want to be but will lead them to true humanity.

## CONCLUSION

As Shirley Dex has pointed out, social scientific and theological interpretations of why more women than men seem to be Christians appear to have a lot in common. This is so, especially of social scientific explanations focusing on dependence and deprivation on the one hand, and a theological understanding of liberation on the other. Rather than conflicting, or being complementary but not impinging on one another (McKay 1974), these interpretations appear to coincide at several points. As a Christian and as a sociologist, I find this exciting.

As a Christian and as a man, though, I find it disturbing. It places under judgement the patriarchal personality of domination and pride, independence and control, that I, as a man, have to struggle against. And it reveals yet again the unenviable options facing women—in this case, to find liberation from a patriarchal society by opting into an even more patriarchal church.

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