

Men behaving badly: Gender and churchgoing

by [John Dart](#) in the [November 15, 2000](#) issue

"Women are more religious than men." That's a longstanding generalization made by pastors surveying their pews and by social scientists surveying the public. Husbands and single guys with other weekend plans might even offer that truism as an excuse for skipping church.

Why the gender difference? Old explanations said women were less educated, or cited their nurturing tasks at home and secondary roles in society. Yet when droves of well-educated women took on jobs and busy schedules, they too tended to pray more than men, to attend services more, and to affirm (to pollsters) more religious beliefs.

Now a provocative scholar known for innovative social theories is suggesting that the disparity lies in the biochemistry of certain men. Six percent of young males have been identified in criminology studies as physiologically disposed to take risks for momentary excitement without regard for consequences. This cohort of men serves as a dismal model of masculinity for many other men, said Rodney Stark, who has taught sociology and comparative religion for nearly 30 years at the University of Washington.

"We've all been taught to laugh at the idea that some people were 'born criminal,'" said Stark to a packed room at the Religious Research Association meeting last month in Houston. The RRA meets annually with the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, and both groups of specialists are interested in social and cultural bases for behavior, not physiological or genetic causes.

"If I have offended you to say it's in the genes, it is so that I might provoke sociologists to do [new] research," said Stark.

Stark invaded the realm of historians and biblical scholars in 1996 with *The Rise of Christianity*, a sociological account of why the early church grew. Earlier this year, in

Acts of Faith, Stark and coauthor Roger Finke of Pennsylvania State University defended their influential and controversial principle of “rational choice,” which they apply to the study of religion. According to this theory, religious bodies expand by demanding strong commitment while providing social and personal benefits. Critics says this mode of analysis gives too little significance to religious motives.

In Houston Stark presented polls results from 49 nations that show women consistently exhibiting higher levels of religious belief and practice than men, demonstrating that the differences are not just North American. In arguing for more research in physiology, he cited “a definitive health survey” of nearly 4,500 Vietnam war veterans revealing that men with the highest levels of testosterone—a male sex hormone—were violent and impulsive, committed crimes, abused drugs, were promiscuous, beat their wives and had poor work records.

“Recent studies of biochemistry . . . imply that both male irreligiousness and male lawlessness are rooted in the fact that far more males than females have an underdeveloped ability to inhibit their impulses, especially those involving immediate gratification and thrills,” Stark said.

“These men set some very unfortunate examples—some men pick up on that,” said Stark, in conceding that social influences are a factor as well. The fearless risk-takers “serve as undesirable role models, setting quite excessive standards for masculinity: ‘Real men take what they want.’ ‘Only wimps go to church.’”

Responding to Stark, Paula Nesbitt of Denver University said that “as a feminist, I am uncomfortable with biological arguments” for assessing the capabilities of men and women. “In my work on women’s ordination,” she said, “the fact that women can give birth has been used as an argument against social equality.” At the same time, she said, “I cannot tell you that hormonal levels [in men and women] are not influential.”

Before sociologists “jump on the biological bandwagon,” Nesbitt said, they should consider whether the male affinity for outdoor activity and athletics might also fit into the definition of religiosity and spirituality. And consider also, she said, “women who may be attracted to religion for community and friendship” more than prayer and otherworldly concerns.

Two other reports at the RRA meeting were pertinent to the discussion, according to Stark. Sean Everton of Stanford University said that next to Easter Sunday, Mother’s

Day drew the second, third or fourth biggest crowds for worship at four mainline churches on the West Coast. Tracking church records over several years, Everton discovered that Palm Sunday and Thanksgiving Sunday are the only rivals to the tribute to Mom on the second Sunday in May. Christmas attendance is spread over more than one Sunday. "Father's Day doesn't even come close," he said.

Darren Sherkat of Vanderbilt University contended that gay men "are more avid religious participants than are male heterosexuals . . . and are similar to female heterosexuals in their rates of religious participation." People who call themselves bisexuals in the same General Social Surveys in the 1990s were the least pious and attended religious services the least. Lesbians were a little more religious than bisexuals, but they prayed and attended church less frequently than gay men, he said.

Not one to mince words, Stark dismissed most earlier sociological explanations of women's greater religiosity as "tautological, inconsistent with the evidence, or silly." He credited researchers Alan S. Miller and John P. Hoffmann with "a remarkable insight" in a study published five years ago.

Miller and Hoffmann said that only one other gender difference is similar to the one involving religion: females are far less likely than males to commit violent crimes. Studies have shown that men and women are roughly equal in committing premeditated crimes (like poisoning and forgery), but that violent, dangerous acts such as assault, robbery and rape are predominantly committed by men.

Stark's linking of impulsive, short-term gratification by young males to their nonreligious behavior appeared to draw a sympathetic hearing. That wasn't the case, however, for another part of Stark's theory—his claim that males who shun faith and worship services do so because they get a kick out of risking hellfire and damnation, or at least the loss of a heavenly afterlife.

Several academics demurred. If the irresponsible male is seeking thrills without considering long-term risks, then he is not going to be worried about hell (or figures there is always time left to repent).

Sociologist Dean R. Hoge of Catholic University of America, in comments after the session, said that during a summer studying Pentecostals in South America he saw that many men "don't participate because they don't want to give up alcohol, gambling and womanizing," which are strictly prohibited by the churches.

Others pointed out that the notion of an afterlife threat is irrelevant to some religions. Among Western religious groups, said Marion S. Goldman of the University of Oregon, "Reform Judaism and Christian Science are almost risk-free in terms of an afterlife." And: "Perhaps men want some risk in religious activities."

The Jesus Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, which jolted stodgy evangelicals with its hippie-like clothing and long hair, was disproportionately masculine, Goldman pointed out. Revitalization movements from Jesus-preaching weightlifters to Promise Keepers have enjoyed peaks of popularity.

"Perhaps religiosity with risk is what is necessary to bring men back, and Bikers for Christ is the wave of the future," she said, noting also the many male followers in the Nation of Islam. And what about young Muslims in the Middle East ready to risk their lives in some form of holy war? asked another scholar.

On the whole, Goldman praised Stark's latest work. "Like much of Stark's other work, [it] forces us to consider issues that most sociologists of religion take for granted," she wrote. "Now that the outrage over 'rational choice' has somewhat subsided, Stark's back!"

Stark said in an interview that he and his wife currently live and work on their research projects outside of Albuquerque. However, he retains his professorial title and benefits at the University of Washington. He said he was eager to return to his research on the Middle Ages. Let that be fair warning for medievalists.