

that (1) women were more likely to describe themselves as pious or religious across almost all societies studied, but men were more likely or equally likely to be active “organizational participants” (i.e., go to church regularly, etc.) in about 25 percent of countries. (2) Most importantly for our purposes, while the traditional pattern continues to hold among Christians, there was little difference in how devout male and female Jews (particularly Orthodox Jews) or male and female Muslims are (Sullins 2006). Since Sullins published his analysis, more extensive data from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and Iran have confirmed his findings for a number of Muslim countries (Moaddel 2007). The gender gap in religion is large in the United States because of the dominance of Christian and Catholic traditions, but it does not hold for all religions across the world.

Why might the relationship between gender and religiosity be different among Jews and Muslims than among Christians? This is a fascinating sociological puzzle. Consider the gender differences in the way that faith is or was lived in traditionally Muslim countries, or among Jews in some earlier, more traditional period. All male orthodox Jews were expected to spend much of their time studying the Torah and the Talmud—in other words, in religious study. In contrast, women and girls were not allowed to participate in such activities. Women were much less likely to go to temple than men, and most did not even know how to participate in the prayers that were the major part of the service. Women performed a variety of small rituals at home, but their intellectual and perhaps emotional engagements with religion were comparatively limited.

The status of Muslim women is similar. Young Muslim boys are trained to memorize the Koran; girls are not (although some may choose to do so). The number of women who pray at the mosque is generally a fraction of the number of men. Those who do attend are shunted off to the rear or side. One of the five pillars of Muslim practice is the Hajj, or ritual visit to Mecca, which religious Muslims try to perform at least once in their lifetime. Yet males always outnumber females at the Hajj by very large margins. In general, then, Muslim men might attend services more often in some countries, while more or equal numbers of Muslim women consider themselves religious. The proposition that women are always more religious than men is really quite questionable.

Questions about Muslim and Jewish gender differences do not invalidate the consistent finding of greater female religiosity in most Christian settings. Why might this gender difference be the case among Christians? I begin by noting that in practice Christianity may be more egalitarian than Orthodox Judaism or Islam. Although all Catholic priests are male, most traditional Catholic men

and women occupy similar positions toward their faith in that the priest does most of the work and the thinking for them. The men do not have to know any more than the women. They need to be obedient. In radical Protestantism, on the other hand, every person, male and female, should have a personal relationship with God and read the Bible. Again, the ministers and theologians might be men, but their importance is downgraded before the individual parishioner’s role in his or her own religious life.

Why Do We Become More Religious as We Age?

14.3.2 Explain why older people tend to be more religious.

One of the more interesting, if less important, reasons women are more religious than men in most places is that on average in most societies around the world women live longer than men. In most developed countries women outlive men by about five years. And, as many of us know from our own experience, older people are more religious than younger people.

For a long time, the age difference in religiosity was thought to derive from the confrontation with death becoming increasingly acute as we age. Alternatively, mature wisdom and perspective were seen to replace the rebelliousness of youth.

Today, however, most sociologists agree that the most important reason older people tend to be more religious is not aging but what is called a “cohort” difference: Older people were brought up in more religious times than younger people. Your grandparents were always more religious than you (or at least most of you). This can be clearly seen in Figure 14.5.

As Figure 14.5 shows, the generations (usually called cohorts by sociologists) born earlier are always more likely to say they go to church than the generations born later, and each generation starts at a lower level of attendance in their early 20s than the previous generation (or cohort).

The data in Figure 14.5, however, do not track the religiosity of individuals over their lifetime, which is a much more difficult job. To do so, we would have had to start the research more than 50 years ago. We have only a few such long-term studies that measured religiosity, and they are for selected, not-very-representative samples. Nevertheless, these can give us some idea of individual change. One such study follows a group of Oakland, California, students who were interviewed while in high school in the late 1920s and then interviewed several additional times, most recently in the 1990s when they were well into their 70s (Dillon and Wink 2007). Figure 14.6 shows their religious trajectories, by gender,