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Are women more religious than men? Gender differences in religious activity among different religious groups in the UK

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Abstract

Are women more religious than men? Four religious-cultural groups in the UK were examined, using a short measure of religious activity developed to enable measurement comparable between different religious groups. Gender differences were examined among volunteers who were self-defined as Christian ($n=230$), Hindu ($n=56$), Jewish ($n=157$) and Muslim ($n=87$). Women ($n=302$) described themselves as significantly *less* religiously active than did men ($n=226$), but this effect was confined to the non-Christian groups. It is suggested that the general conclusion that women are more religious than men is culture-specific, and contingent on the measurement method used.

Keywords: Religious activity; gender differences

1. Introduction

Are women more religious than men? This has been the general conclusion in the social scientific and psychological literature (Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975; Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993; Beit-Hallahmi & Argyle, 1997; Brown, 1987; Francis, 1993; Paloutzian, 1996). Thus Batson et al.'s overview, on predominantly Christian samples, reports higher levels of attendance and Bible study among women than among men. Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle concluded that there were higher levels of religious involvement, prayer, experience and overall religiosity among women compared to men, and suggested that these gender differences may be a reflection of greater opportunity among women for religious activity, or perhaps of differences in personality and socialisation.

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However, this effect may be culture-specific. Many religious traditions differentiate between the religious obligations of men and women, placing greater onus upon men to fulfil religious duties such as prayer and text study. Traditional Judaism and Islam place less strenuous religious obligations upon women than upon men in some respects, due particularly to the traditional allocation of primary home making and child care responsibilities to women. For example, attendance at a place of religious worship may be less frequent for Jewish and Muslim women compared to men. Jewish women are not required to pray with a congregation, unlike men, so even very observant women may not attend a place of worship. Muslim women should not enter a mosque during menstruation, so the devout woman would be expected to attend a place of worship less often than a man. Women who are occupied with family responsibilities may be less obligated to pray or to engage in religious study. Thus on measures of religious activity, Jewish and Muslim women may appear less "religious" than Jewish and Muslim men. By contrast, studies involving Christian samples have shown that women tend to score higher than do men on measures of religiosity and religious activity. Observations of Hindus suggest that on the whole, women are concluded to be more religiously-active than are men: *puja* (prayer) is often carried out at shrines in the home by women (Firth, 1997), and Hindu temples are said to be more frequented by women than by men.

This would lead us to expect different effects of gender among Christians and Hindus than among Jews and Muslims. Jewish and Muslim men would appear more religiously active than women. Christian and Hindu women, however, would be expected to be more active than Christian and Hindu men.

To make comparisons between different religious groups involved developing a measure which could be applied meaningfully in different groups.

How has religiosity been measured? It has long been recognised that *general* religiosity cannot be operationalised and assessed (Glock & Stark, 1965), and more specific behavioural, emotional and cognitive aspects of religion and spirituality need to be identified. Inspection of the measures of religiosity in the excellent collections of Hill and Hood (1999), Maltby, Lewis and Hill (2000), and the ERIC/AE Test Locator (The Buros Institute, 1999) suggest that different researchers have developed measures of religiosity and spirituality to suit their immediate research needs, and virtually all measures of religiosity have been developed in Christian contexts, and are unsuitable for use in other religious traditions. Some researchers have addressed this problem by developing measures useful within particular religious traditions. For example Littlewood and Lipsedge's (1998) Religious Interest Questionnaire has a specific section for Jewish participants, while Khan (2001) and Sitwat (2001) have both developed measures suitable for use with Muslim participants. Such measures comprise mostly questions about religious observance and belief specific to the cultural-religious tradition under study, for example, fasting on Yom Kippur (Jewish) or Ramadan (Islam).

However, researchers who wish to assess religiosity in *different* religious groups, and to make direct *comparisons* between groups, have little available to them. This paper involves use of a self-report scale assessing frequency of three behaviours generic to the main world religions: attendance at a place of worship, prayer, and religious study. The scale has been used in investigations of members of different religious groups in the UK, and can be used to make comparisons between members of different religious groups in levels of religious activity. In particular, we asked whether there were gender differences in religious activity among members of the different religious groups.

We had no compelling a priori reasons to expect overall differences on the scale between different religious groups. However, we expected some specific effects of gender on the scale, among the different religious groups, as described above, namely, that Jewish and Muslim women might be less religiously-active than men, while Christian and Hindu women might be more active.

2. Method and measurement

The study involved a measure of religious activity developed to be applicable in different religious groups, and also to be usable by people who are not religiously active. It comprises three items of religious behaviour regarded as important in the major religious traditions: attendance, prayer and religious study. The measure has been used successfully on groups of Christians, Hindus, Jews, and Muslims in the UK, and among the non-religious. (Kamal & Loewenthal, 2001; Loewenthal, Cinnirella, Evdoka, & Murphy, 2001; Loewenthal, MacLeod, Cook, & Lee, 2001; Loewenthal, MacLeod, Goldblatt, Lubitsh, & Valentine, 2000). Smaller numbers of people from other religious groups (Buddhist, Sikh, New Age), and the non-affiliated, have completed the scale without difficulty, but numbers in these groups have been too small to allow meaningful inclusion in the comparisons of men and women reported here.

The scale is a three-item scale as follows:

1. How often do you attend a place of religious worship? (Circle one, whichever is the closest to your usual practice) *Never/Occasionally/Monthly/Weekly/Daily*.
2. How often do you pray? (Circle one, whichever is the closest to your usual practice) *Never/Occasionally/Monthly/Weekly/Daily*.
3. How often do you study religious texts? (Circle one, whichever is the closest to your usual practice) *Never/Occasionally/Monthly/Weekly/Daily*.

Participants' responses are on a five-point scale (0–4), and overall scores may be represented by the sum of responses to all three items (range 0–12), or by an overall item mean (range 0–4). Cronbach's alphas for the scale were satisfactory, ranging from 0.728 to 0.907. Criterion validity was satisfactory, with significant associations between religious affiliation and scores on the religious activity scale. Evidence of construct validity included significant associations between scores on the scale and measures of religious beliefs, religious orientation, and religious coping beliefs (Kamal & Loewenthal, 2001; Loewenthal et al., 2000; Loewenthal, Cinirella et al., 2001; Loewenthal, Macleod, et al., 2001). The measure is thought to be particularly useful where researchers are seeking a short measure which focuses on religious activity (rather than the cognitive and emotional aspects of religion), which can be used among participants from different religious traditions, or who claim no religious identification. The measure permits meaningful quantitative comparisons to be made between members of different religious-cultural groups.

Gender differences were examined using data from a total of 530 participants in the four studies listed above. Participants were recruited by ethnically and religiously matched interviewers. In all studies (except Loewenthal, Cinnirella et al., 2001) the samples were quota samples. Interviewers were asked to recruit target numbers of adults, self-defined as belonging to a specific religious tradition, with approximately even numbers of men and women. Opportunistic and snowball recruiting methods were used, and refusal rates were reported to be negligible. Participants

were students, housewives, white-collar workers and professionals. The Loewenthal, Cinnirella et al. (2001) study involved convenience volunteer samples from university campuses, students and university employees. All participants were UK residents, living in southern England at the time of the study. There were 230 Christians (101 men, 129 women, mean age 32.4), 56 Hindus (26 men, 30 women, mean age 21.7), 157 Jews (62 men, 95 women, mean age 39.2) and 87 Muslims (39 men, 48 women, mean age 22.5). There were significant between-group differences in age ($F_{3585} = 38.0$, $P > 0.0001$), and age was therefore partialled out as a covariate in analyses of group and gender differences in religious activity.

3. Results

Table 1 shows the mean scores on the whole scale, and for each of the three individual items, for men and for women, for the four religious groups studied, and for men and women separately within each group.

Analyses of covariance, partialling out the effects of age, showed generally significant effects of gender, religious group, and gender×religious group interaction. What were these effects? First, women reported a lower level of reported religious activity than did men. Second, among Christians and Jews, reported religious activity was higher than among Hindus and Muslims (post-hoc comparisons using multiple range tests of least significant differences were significant at the $P < 0.05$ level). Thirdly, there was a differential effect of religious group on gender differences in religious activity, such that Christian women were slightly more active than men, while Hindu, Jewish and Muslim women were less active than men. These directions of differences on the overall measure were generally reflected in the patterns of differences on the individual measures (Table 1).

4. Discussion

Although the meaning and desirability of the different religious behaviours reported in the scale might vary in the different religious traditions, we had no reason to suspect any noteworthy variations between the groups we studied in the UK. The scale was completed readily by all participants, and there were fairly similar overall levels of activity between the different groups studied, although post-hoc comparisons showed significantly higher levels of self-reported religious activity among the Christians and Jews compared to the Hindus and Muslims. The differences between religious groups may be an artefact of the sampling strategies employed in the different studies. All except one of the studies used *quota* sampling, in which self-identification as a member of a religious group was used as a criterion (sometimes one of several criteria) for inclusion in the study. This could have resulted in non-representative samples of the religious groups in question. Some of the groups were relatively young, and the relatively low religious activity among the Hindu and Muslim groups may have been the result of an age effect. However, the effects of age were partialled out of the analyses of group and gender differences. Random sampling may have yielded smaller or no group differences. The relatively high level of religious activity among the Jews may have been a result of the sampling strategy, combined with the fact the testing was done in the UK. Most affiliated Jews in the UK belong to orthodox synagogues

Table 1
Mean scores (and S.D.s) on the scale, and its individual items, for Christians, Hindus, Jews and Muslims, and for men and women separately within each group (the total number of participants included in these analyses was 530)[a]

	All		Christian			Hindu			Jewish			Muslim		
	M	F	ALL	M	F	ALL	M	F	ALL	M	F	ALL	M	F
	$n=228$	302	230	101	129	56	26	30	157	62	95	87	39	48
Total scale	6.23	5.67	5.82	5.73	5.89	4.94	5.31	4.48	6.15	7.26	5.47	4.61	5.63	3.85
	(3.71)	(3.12)	(3.53)	(3.79)	(3.32)	(2.73)	(3.15)	(2.28)	(4.01)	(4.67)	(3.34)	(3.08)	(2.87)	(2.98)
Attend	2.13	1.86	1.96	2.01	1.93	1.64	1.69	1.52	1.93	2.37	1.66	1.51	1.98	1.15
	(1.30)	(1.21)	(1.15)	(1.18)	(1.13)	(1.09)	(1.16)	(0.96)	(1.34)	(1.55)	(1.13)	(1.27)	(1.25)	(1.18)
Pray	2.19	2.12	2.07	1.89	2.20	2.00	2.19	1.77	2.25	2.52	2.08	1.60	2.00	1.30
	(1.63)	(1.55)	(1.57)	(1.65)	(1.50)	(1.57)	(1.55)	(1.56)	(1.63)	(1.68)	(1.59)	(1.52)	(1.57)	(1.42)
Study	2.91	2.68	1.79	1.84	1.75	1.31	1.42	1.19	1.97	2.37	1.72	1.51	1.65	1.40
	(1.26)	(1.08)	(1.16)	(1.27)	(1.07)	(1.08)	(1.27)	(0.91)	(1.44)	(1.60)	(1.28)	(0.97)	(0.77)	(1.10)

[a] Significance of effects were: g*ender* on total scale ($F_{1,522}=10.68$, $P<0.001$), attendance ($F_{1,522}=14.53$, $P<0.001$), prayer, ($F_{1,522}=4.00$, $P<0.05$), and study ($F_{1,522}=6.28$, $P<0.05$); r*eligious group* on total scale ($F_{3,522}=5.36$, $P<0.001$), attendance ($F_{1,522}=4.22$, $P<0.01$), prayer, ($F_{1,522}=1.33$, ns), and study ($F_{1,522}=5.49$, $P<0.001$); *Religious group* × *Gender interaction* on total scale ($F_{3,522}=3.05$, $P<0.05$), attendance ($F_{1,522}=3.16$, $P<0.05$), prayer, ($F_{1,522}=4.29$, $P<0.01$), and study ($F_{1,522}=1.60$, ns).

(Shmool & Cohen, 1991), where relatively high levels (by world standards) of observance are fairly normative. Orthodox affiliation is not normative in Israel or most other countries of Jewish settlement. With hindsight, we can conclude that the measure has proved sensitive to differences in levels of religious activity between samples from different religious groups.

Gender differences were as expected among the Christians, Jews and Muslims, but not as expected among the Hindus. Christian women reported slightly higher levels of religious activity than did the men, while among the other three religious groups, levels of reported religious activity were markedly lower among women than among men.

How can we explain these gender differences in reported religious observance? Among the Jews and Muslims, there were marked differences between women and men, in keeping with observations about the roles of women and men in these traditions (e.g. Loewenthal, 1995). These differences are also consistent with the view that men's prescribed religious activities in traditional religion are more prestigious, and thus more likely to be engaged in. Hindu men also reported greater levels of religious activity than did Hindu women. In line with this, we offer the observation by informants of South Asian origin, that young South Asian men in Britain are more religiously enthusiastic and active, than are young women. This observation applies to Hindus and Sikhs, as well as Muslims.

It is important to comment that the traditional conclusion among psychologists of religion, that women are consistently "more religious" than men, has been based on studies almost entirely of Christian samples and cultures. The use of the present measure among Hindus, Muslims and Jews has cast strong doubt on the applicability of this conclusion to other non-Christian cultural-religious traditions.

However, we certainly do not wish to suggest the Hindu, Muslim and Jewish women are "less religious" as individuals than are men. Our measure is one of specific religious *activities*, chosen because they were generic to a range of religious traditions. Although the measure *relates* quite strongly to several measures reflecting cognitive and emotional aspects of religion, it is not a measure *of* the cognitive and emotional aspects of religion. It is possible, and even likely, that such measures might show quite different patterns of gender similarity and difference. We would draw attention to the fact that although such measures — for example of religious orientation and spiritual support — were developed in the Christian context, these aspects of religion have been successfully and meaningfully assessed among the non-Christian research participants in the studies drawn upon here.

Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle's (1997) conclusions that women are more religious than men were elaborated by a number of suggested explanations. How do these explanations fare in the light of the results reported here? Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle suggested that personality and socialisation differences, or differences in employment status, might explain differences in religiosity between (Christian) men and women. Although evidence is limited, there is no reason to suppose that personality, socialisation and employment differences between men and women, in Hindus, Jews and Muslims, are the *reverse* of those among Christians, which might be expected if these factors explained gender differences in religiosity. Rather, we think the gender differences observed here are a reflection of cultural norms.

We do contest the over-general conclusion that women are more "religious" than are men. This is definitely not supported by the data drawn upon here. The conclusion that women are more religious than men is probably *specific* to a *specific* religious tradition, and may be specific to

particular aspects of religion. We therefore question the generality of the view that women are more religious than are men.

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