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How American Women and Men Read the Bible

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Sociologists have long debated the relationship between gender and religion; “the fact that women display higher patterns of religiosity than men is one of the most consistent findings in the sociology of religion”ⁱ. Much of the debate has centered around the origins of these differences, whether it be physiological, psychological or sociological^{ii iii iv} as well as the examination of various forms of religiosity, such as church attendance, religious salience, closeness to God, frequency of prayer, strength of affiliation and sometimes biblical orthodoxy.^{v vi} ^{vii} Very little attention has been given to the nature of possible gender differences surrounding reading scriptures. Do women read the Bible more than men? Are there motivational differences between the sexes regarding personal reading?

Bible reading is a key practice in many Christian denominations and could be a behavior that helps explain a woman’s approach to religion. Though perspectives on the Bible and individual Bible reading are used as variables to predict various outcomes (e.g. attitudes on abortion or gay marriage), very little is known about why this is the case. Investigating the motivations behind a common religious activity like Bible reading has the potential to empirically unlock some of these connections. Using the Bible in American Life module of the General Social Survey, I test a series of hypotheses related to the above questions to gain a better understanding of whether and how men and women read the Bible differently, which may contribute to the many differences in religiosity between the genders that may have consequences outside of church walls.

Gender and the Bible

When examining religious practice in the United States, there is little debate that women tend to exhibit higher levels of religious belief and behavior when compared to men.^{viii ix} As mentioned earlier, there are few studies that examine the difference in scripture reading but a brief description of the debate about gender differences in other religious activities may help illuminate

expectations for findings in the novel Bible in American Life dataset. Sociologists and psychologists mainly debate whether gender differences have biological or social explanations, and the competing theories involve risk aversion, power control, affective versus active and extrinsic versus intrinsic approaches to religion.

Some scholars posit that women are naturally risk averse (for biological and evolutionary adaptive reasons), on average, compared to men in most parts of life.^x Thus, religion is the ultimate insurance against the risk of eternal damnation or other consequences of nonbelief. Other scholars suggest a power control theory where patriarchal households socialize women into this risk aversion as well as religious belief and behavior.^{xi} In the latter vein, Hoffman and Bartkowski^{xii} offer one of the few studies that incorporates scripture variables into the origins of sex differences in religiosity. They find that women are significantly more likely than men to adhere to literal views on the Bible when they belong to “patriarchal” denominations compared to mainline congregations. Hoffman and Bartkowski^{xiii} explain that because women are denied leadership and other organizational positions within conservative Protestant churches, they compensate by accepting a stricter conception of biblical authority that demonstrates dedication and personal piety to a “key schema of their faith”.^{xiv} While the current study is more concerned with Bible reading and motivation than literalism, Hoffman and Bartkowski’s theory is a helpful step in establishing expectations of gender differences on my religious variables.^{xv} Conservative denominations are not the only place women have not achieved parity with men in formal roles, and thus, Bible reading may be a mechanism that cultivates female religiosity by keeping them engaged and tied to the faith, even if they feel excluded in areas of congregational organization.

To wit, religiosity for women may be driven more by internal motivations such that reading the Bible and seeking to know more about God is an end in itself; whereas men may approach religion for external purposes such as leadership skill building and networking. Though the current

study does not employ this battery, there is a long line of research related to the study of intrinsic and extrinsic religious motivation.^{xvi} These scholars suggest that “the extrinsically motivated person uses his religion, whereas the intrinsically motivated person lives his religion”^{xvii}, indicating that individuals may be approaching religious belief and behavior using different psychological processes. Those who view religion as what it can do for them are extrinsically motivated and answer affirmatively to statements like “What religion offers me most is comfort in times of trouble and sorrow,” while intrinsically motivated individuals are more likely to say, “My whole approach to life is based upon my religion”.^{xviii} Men and women can be either intrinsically or extrinsically motivated, but there is some evidence that men take a more instrumental approach to their religious activity. Indeed, when examining the gender differences in religiosity across cultures, men tend to be more involved in active, public displays of religiosity in religions like Judaism and Islam that are generally sex-segregated, whereas women are more “affectively” religious than men when it comes to measures of personal piety.^{xix}

Currently, there is little scholarship on gender and one of the most common devotional behaviors of our nation’s most influential and pervasive religion. The findings have the potential to further the debate about the nature of gendered differences in religiosity, including whether Bible reading might be the mechanism that contributes to women exhibiting higher levels of religious salience, private devotion, and greater sense of denominational belonging, providing further evidence that a woman’s religious experience may be more internally motivated and may explain why women may be more involved in religious activity than men, yet men are more likely to ascribe to leadership positions both inside the congregation and in the community.

Empirics and Discussion

Leveraging the unique questions contained in the Bible in American Life module of the General Social Survey (n=1,551)¹, I am able to test a series of hypotheses related to how men and women read and experience the Bible. To begin, participants were asked if they read scripture outside of a worship service in the past year (yes=50.4%; men saying yes = 43.1%; women saying yes = 56.4%). A bivariate logistic regression reveals that the odds of reading scripture in the past year are greater for women than men (odds ratio=1.65, p = .00). This relationship holds even when controlling for age, income, education, marital status and religious tradition (which will be detailed more below). Women also read the Bible more days than men, on average, in the past 30 days (11.267 as compared to 8.812), and this difference is significant in an ANOVA (F=7.57, p=.006) and holds when controlling for age, income, education, marital status and religious tradition. It is possible that women may read more books generally than men,^{xx xxi} but I am unable to test this assumption as there are no measures of general book reading in the 2010 GSS.

Why might women read the Bible more than men? As noted earlier, scholars have posited several theories espousing why women tend to be more religious than men but there has been little work completed on how this specifically might relate to a behavior like scripture readings. For participants who indicated they had read scripture in the past year, the Bible in American Life module asked a series of unique questions to uncover the motivations behind this textual study. Because the overwhelming majority of the sample indicated the Bible was the predominant scripture they had read (95%), the following analyses will focus on this text, and excluding those who read another book drops the sample to 1,508.

¹ Analyses were weighted using the General Social Survey weighting variable for 2010. See <http://publicdata.norc.org:41000/gss/documents//OTHR/Release%20Notes%20for%20GSS%20Panel%2010W12%20R1.pdf>.

Participants were given the following scenario/question battery: “The Bible is used in many ways. In the past year, to what extent have you used the Bible in the following ways? Please use a scale of 1-5 with (1) being “not at all,” (2) being “to a small extent,” (3) being “to a moderate extent,” (4) being “to a considerable extent,” and (5) being “to a great extent.” The follow-up statements are listed in Appendix A. Specifically, I expect women to be more likely to indicate they read the Bible for private reasons like personal devotion and help with relationships^{xxii} as well as concerns for health or healing.^{xxiii} Figure 1 displays the one-way ANOVAs testing the mean difference between men and women on each of the Bible reading motivation items. The first observation to note is that men and women read the Bible for personal devotional reasons over any other, followed by learning about religion and making decisions about personal relationships. That is, the primary motivators to study scripture outside of worship services are due to personal reasons and a desire to learn.

There are some important, significant differences between the genders, though. As expected, women are higher on personal devotion ($p < .000$), making decisions about relationships ($p = .07$), and learning about attaining health or healing ($p < .05$). Women are also more likely to read the Bible to learn about attaining wealth and prosperity, though this effect did not reach traditional levels of statistical significance ($p = .10$). There was no relationship between gender and reading the Bible to learn about what the future holds ($p = .67$) or to learn about religion ($p = .16$), though in the latter, women did score higher than men.

Several of the questions conflate two concepts that may have gender differences separately but when put in the same question will muddle gender effects. For example, men are probably more likely to “prepare” to teach a study group but women are more likely than men to “participate” in a study group^{xxiv} so I would not expect to see a gender difference in that measure – indeed, there is no gender effect ($p = .79$). Similarly, women may be more likely to seek answers

regarding poverty as they tend to be more interested than men in social welfare issues^{xxv xxvi} but this would not necessarily be the case in considerations of war. Similarly, the conflation of learning about “issues like abortion and homosexuality” could wash away any gender effect – though there doesn’t seem to be a gender difference in actual public opinion on these matters.^{xxvii} ^{xxviii} Contrary to my predictions, men are more likely than women to read the Bible to learn about poverty and war ($p < .05$) and abortion and homosexuality ($p = .08$). It is important to keep in mind that all participants reported reading the Bible less for these political reasons than for private devotional purposes, but there is a gender difference nonetheless. Women are more likely than men to read the Bible to further their spirituality or to seek counsel on items that affect them personally. Men read for these reasons as well but edge out women when reading for topics with political undertones.

Several factors could influence Bible reading and manifest in bivariate results because gender is perhaps serving as a proxy for something like socioeconomic status.^{xxix xxx xxxi} Thus, I included a series of demographic variables to further test my hypotheses regarding reading the Bible for relationship help, private devotionalism, learning about homosexuality and abortion as well as poverty and war. I narrowed my analyses to these four dependent variables because they best represent the theoretical justifications of gender differences in religiosity due to public/private sphere^{xxxii} and active versus affective approaches.^{xxxiii} Tables 1 and 2 display the results. When accounting for age, income, education, marital status (with single, never married as the missing category) and religious tradition (using the RELTRAD coding from Steensland et al. 2000, and religious “nones” being the missing category), gendered differences still appear. Nones and Non-Christians are included because some of these individuals have read the Bible in the past year, and it is interesting note for which reading motivations specific Christian traditions are similar or dissimilar to the unaffiliated.

Women and men were equally likely to indicate the extent they read the Bible to assist in making personal relationship decisions ($p=.146$), though women did score higher on this measure (the expected direction). Religious tradition seems to be the driving force on this dependent variable, as evangelicals, black Protestants and mainline Protestants are more likely than religious nones to read for this reason. Being Catholic, age, income, education and marital status do not significantly impact reading for personal relationship decisions.

Turning to private devotion and prayer, however, being female increases the extent to which a participant reads the Bible for this reason by $.377$ ($p=.000$), when holding all other variables constant. Religious affiliation tells the other part of this story as evangelicals, black Protestants, mainliners and Catholics are more likely than religious nones to read for personal prayer and devotion. No demographic measures are significant predictors of this behavior.

In Table 2, the full models regressed on political motivations are displayed.² Gender is not a factor for reading the Bible to learn about homosexuality and abortion ($p=.203$) but it matters significantly for poverty and war ($p=.025$). Lower levels of education and being evangelical as compared to no religious affiliation also increase the extent to which individuals read about poverty and war. Increased age and lower levels of education are the only significant predictors of reading to learn about homosexuality and abortion. The only significant relationships between religious tradition and these socio-political motivations is being evangelical on reading about poverty and war, which is somewhat surprising because of all of the religious traditions, it tends to be less concerned with social welfare and foreign policy issues.^{xxxiv xxxv xxxvi} It is important to note the low explanatory power of these models ($R^2 = .057$ to $.146$), indicating that there are other variables that better explain the variance in these measures. For example, it

² Because more individuals indicated “not at all” as the extent to which they read the Bible for these political reasons, the poverty/war and abortion/homosexuality variables displayed skewness > 1 . I took the natural log of each and re-ran the models; results remained the same.

is likely that politically interested individuals and/or those who are strong ideologues with intense policy preferences read the Bible to learn about these issues, which is beyond the scope of the current analysis.

Moving beyond reading motivation, there are a few other gender findings of note in this unique dataset on Bible reading. The survey asked a series of questions related to whether individuals sought help in “interpreting and understanding what you read” in scripture in the past 30 days. Women and men were equally likely to have sought help in interpretation, and there are also no differences in whether they solicited help from clergy, study group leaders or members, published commentary, an Internet site, or television/radio program.³ There was also no difference in the likelihood between genders of individuals choosing to memorize scripture.

Though men and women were just as likely to indicate they had a favorite book of the Bible, there were some interesting contrasts in the preferred book. Of the people who indicated a favorite book (n=469), women overwhelmingly mentioned Psalms (female n=103; male n=22), whereas the modal book for men was Revelation (male n=18; female n=12). This, too, fits with the theory that women read the Bible for personal, comforting, possibly psychological reasons as compared to men.

Conclusion

Results from the Bible in American Life module confirm extant findings about the differences in male and female religiosity in the United States. Women edge out men on Bible reading, demonstrating that personal piety (affective) is a driving force behind their religious participation, and the motivation is more likely for personal devotion rather than for political reasons. Future research should explore the institutional structures that encourage individual

³ Pearson’s chi-square tests were administered to each dichotomous variable with gender, all resulting in p values > .10.

Bible reading within congregations and whether personality or socialized differences between men and women interact with these structures to result in differential Bible behaviors. Women may see dedicated Bible reading as a controllable outlet for their faith expression^{xxxvii} that increases their religious participation and depth of faith without translating into leadership or civic skill development within congregational structures or the community.^{xxxviii} Men may not see the benefit in personal piety behaviors like scripture reading because their time and efforts are recruited and dedicated to organizational participation.

Appendix

“The Bible is used in many ways. In the past year, to what extent have you used the Bible in the following ways? Please use a scale of 1-5 with (1) being “not at all,” (2) being “to a small extent,” (3) being “to a moderate extent,” (4) being “to a considerable extent,” and (5) being “to a great extent.”

To learn about your religion

As a matter of personal prayer and devotion

To prepare to teach or participate in a study group

To make decisions about your relationship with your spouse, parents, children or friends

To learn about attaining wealth or prosperity

To learn about attaining health or healing

To learn about what the future holds

To learn about issues like abortion or homosexuality

To learn about issues like poverty or war

Figure 1: Mean difference of Bible Reading Motivation, by Gender

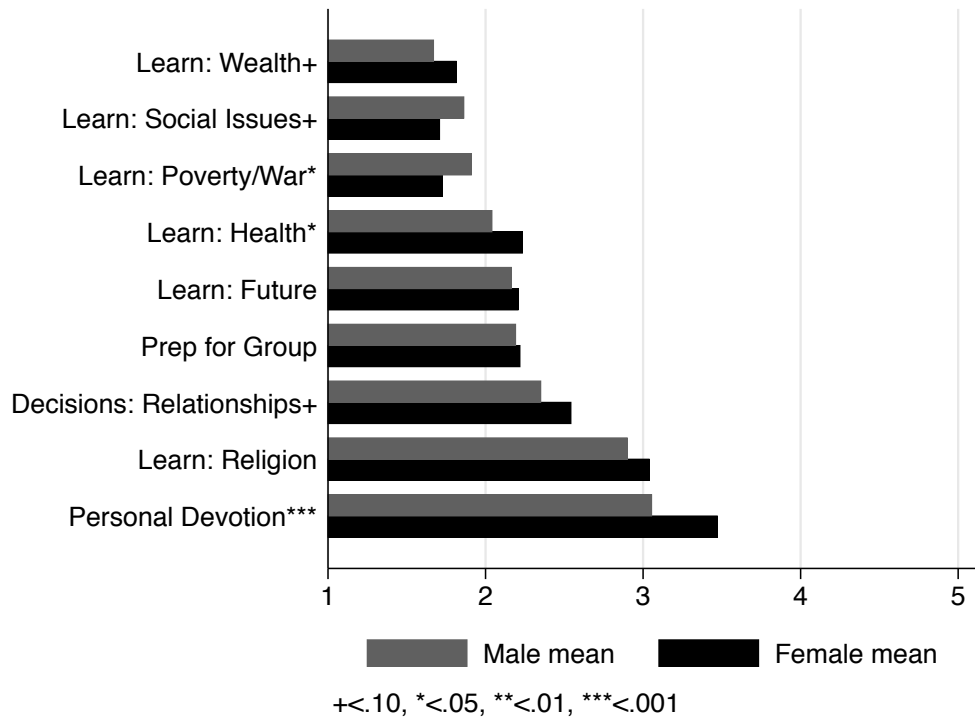


Table 1: OLS Regression of Reasons Americans Read the Bible

	Decisions about Personal Relationships		Personal Prayer and Devotion	
	Coeff. (S.E.)	P	Coeff. (S.E.)	P
Female	.153 (.105)	.146	.377 (.095)	.000
Age	-.004 (.004)	.230	.001 (.003)	.811
Education	-.062 (.045)	.165	-.021 (.041)	.613
Income	-.018 (.026)	.476	-.003 (.041)	.912
Married	-.124 (.141)	.380	-.171 (.128)	.183
Divorced/Widowed/Separated	.262 (.167)	.116	.106 (.151)	.485
Evangelical	1.119 (.197)	.000	1.305 (.178)	.000
Black Protestant	1.111 (.278)	.000	1.094 (.252)	.000
Mainline Protestant	.583 (.216)	.007	.882 (.195)	.000
Catholic	.218 (.221)	.323	.452 (.200)	.024
NonChristian	.472 (.702)	.501	.957 (.637)	.134
Constant	2.146 (.355)	.000	2.219 (.322)	.000
N	669		670	
R ²	.122		.146	

Table 2: OLS Regression of Reasons Americans Read the Bible

	Learn about Abortion and Homosexuality		Learn about Poverty and War	
	Coeff. (S.E.)	P	Coeff. (S.E.)	P
Female	-.117 (.092)	.203	-.207 (.092)	.025
Age	.006 (.003)	.056	-.001 (.003)	.733
Education	-.111 (.039)	.005	-.085 (.039)	.030
Income	-.023 (.023)	.311	-.028 (.023)	.212
Married	.053 (.124)	.671	-.048 (.124)	.700
Divorced/Widowed/Separated	.041 (.146)	.778	.188 (.146)	.199
Evangelical	.086 (.172)	.615	.466 (.172)	.007
Black Protestant	-.097 (.243)	.691	.373 (.244)	.126
Mainline Protestant	-.143 (.188)	.447	.264 (.189)	.162
Catholic	-.533 (.193)	.006	-.029 (.193)	.881
NonChristian	-.047 (.616)	.939	.376 (.616)	.542
Constant	2.043 (.315)	.000	2.132 (.311)	.000
N	669		670	
R ²	.062		.057	

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- ⁱ Jessica L. Collet and Omar Lizardo. "A Power-Control Theory of Gender and Religiosity," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* Vol. 48 No. 2 (2009): 213-231. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-5906.2009.01441.x.
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- ⁱⁱⁱ D. Paul Sullins. "Gender and Religion: Deconstructing Universality, Constructing Complexity," *American Journal of Sociology* Vol. 112 No. 3 (2006): 838-880. doi: 10.1086/507852.
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- ^{xv} *Ibid.*
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