Rodney Stark (2002) has sought to explain the greater religiosity of women, something that he asserts to be a cultural and historical universal, by suggesting that male physiology makes males more impulsive and so less likely to submit to religious prohibitions. Although he presents evidence suggesting that greater female religiosity is true today cross-culturally, he presents no real evidence establishing that this generalization was true prior to the 19th century. In fact, Stark’s article completely overlooks a highly visible and well-established body of scholarly literature suggesting that the “feminization of piety,” in both the Protestant and Catholic traditions, is a relatively recent historical phenomenon.

Rodney Stark (2002:496) has suggested that sociologists of religion have failed to confront an obvious question: “[W]hy are women [on average] more religious than men”? In developing his own answer to this question, he does three things. First, he establishes that this is indeed a cultural and historical universal. Second, he rules out a variety of common sense explanations. Finally, he develops his own explanation (which is that testosterone makes men more impulsive and so more likely to take risks, which in turn makes them less willing to submit to religious prohibitions).

There are many unstated assumptions underlying Stark’s reasoning that might well not stand up to scrutiny. For example, is religion everywhere and always about the prohibition of things that give pleasure to impulsive males? Or is Stark’s implicit understanding of religion just a little too influenced by his familiarity with the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition? In this brief comment, however, I want to call attention to the one part of this argument that is clearly wrong: the contention that the greater religiosity of females is universal.

To his credit, Stark marshals much empirical data, most of it from World Value Surveys taken in the 1990s, which suggest that greater female religiosity is indeed something that is (today) true cross-culturally. He does a less good job, however, in establishing that his generalization is valid across different historical periods. In fact, he devotes just two paragraphs to the matter of history and one of those paragraphs is concerned entirely with the 19th and early-20th centuries. His only “evidence” for greater female religiosity prior to the 19th century rests entirely on some brief allusions to the cults of Isis and Dionysus in the Classical world, to the early Christian experience, and to a few medieval “heretical” groups like the Cathars and the Waldensians. Even apart from the selectivity evident in these remarks, what is most puzzling here is that Stark ignores a body of literature that has high visibility among historians studying European religion, namely, the literature concerned with the “feminization of religion.”

As Barbara Pope (1988:52) has noted, the term “feminization of religion” was first popularized by historians studying New England Protestant groups and referred to three things, namely, “the increasing ratio of women in the churches, the concomitant enhancement of their influence in religion; and certain changes in doctrine and symbol which seemed particularly suited to female needs and experiences.” Subsequent investigators have not only reaffirmed that these patterns hold for the New England case, but also that they can be detected when considering other Protestant groups in other areas. Marilyn Westerkamp (1999:11–34, 75–80), for example, has recently looked at the feminization of piety in the Puritan and evangelical traditions in the United States during the late-17th and 18th centuries, and Callum Brown (2001) has examined the feminization of piety in the British evangelical tradition from the late 1700s onward. Indeed, as Brown notes, “the
A similar concern with the feminization of piety during the 19th century has also, and for some time now, been a concern of scholars investigating the Catholic tradition. Jay Dolan (1992:232–33), for example, discusses this process in his study of U.S. Catholicism and Barbara Pope (1988), does the same for the French Catholic tradition. To the extent that there is disagreement in this literature on Catholicism, it is only over the timing of this increasing feminization. Whereas most commentators discuss the feminization of Catholicism as a 19th-century phenomena, R. Gibson (1993) has argued that its roots (at least in France) lie less in the 19th century and more in the late-17th century. Nevertheless, notwithstanding debates over the “when” of feminization, what is uncontested is that such feminization occurred. Indeed, Kselman (2001:338), echoing Brown, suggests that a concern with the feminization of religion “has become something of a commonplace among historians of religion in modern Europe.”

Of course, to talk of the “feminization of religion” is to imply that lay religiosity was once a masculine preserve or at least something that held equal appeal for males and females. Less effort has been devoted to documenting this in a precise way, but evidence in support of such a view can easily be found. Patricia Bonomi (1986:111–15), in particular, has reviewed many of the relevant studies here. Thus, she (1986:113) cites evidence suggesting that in most colonial Anglican churches, communicants typically included men and women in equal numbers. The evidence for Lutheran churches during the 18th century is mixed: female members predominated in some, but in others the “balance of men and women remained about even” (Bonomi 1986:113). It is true that in Congregational churches, at least from the late 1600s forward, women usually outnumbered males among the membership—but there were certainly areas, she points out, where this was not the case (Bonomi 1986:112).

In the case of the Catholic tradition (with which I am more familiar), the rituals and celebrations most central to the lived experience of Catholicism, at least during the early modern period and in Catholic societies, were those rituals and celebrations organized by lay confraternities—and these confraternities were overwhelmingly masculine. True, some female confraternities did exist, but in areas such as Spain, the Spanish Americas, and Italy the most important community celebrations were those organized and enacted by confraternities whose membership was either predominantly or exclusively male (for a sampling of the literature here, see the essays in Meyers and Hopkins 1988; Donnelly and Maher 1999; Strocchia 1998:48–50).

Catholic religiosity, however, was not always so thoroughly masculinized as it was in Italy and Spain. Prefamine Ireland is a case in point. In the two centuries or so before the Famine, “patterns” were central to the lived experience of Catholicism in Ireland. These were large gatherings held at a sacred site (most often a holy well) dedicated to some saint and attended by a large number of people. These patterns attracted the participation of the laity from all class levels and from both rural and urban areas. As well, the religious rituals performed there (including both “official” rituals like the Mass and the more popular “rounding” rituals) were sanctioned by local priests. Most importantly, however, at least given our concerns here, there is nothing in the reports that we have of these patterns (reviewed in Carroll 1999:35–37, 114–19) suggesting a gender imbalance. If anything, the contrary is true: these reports are equally likely to refer to males and females in describing the participants.

In summary, then, there is much evidence suggesting that the systematic feminization of European religion that was so apparent in the 19th century, in both the Protestant and Catholic traditions, was a relatively recent phenomena. What needs to be explained is why religion became increasingly feminized in moving from the 17th to the 19th centuries—and scholars have approached this issue on two fronts: explaining why religion become more appealing to females and why it became less appealing to males.

In regard to Catholics, for example, Thomas Kselman (2001:337–38) summarizes the debate over the “why” of feminization concisely: some historians attribute it to the fact that the Church
sought to sustain itself in the face of modernist attacks by seeking out a constituency (women) that was superstitious and conservative while others (including Kselman himself) suggest that women flocked to the Church because it was one of the few institutional arenas where they could raise and discuss issues that were important to them as a group. The plausibility of this second argument, I might note, is enhanced by studies that look at other religious traditions or other time periods. Thus, John Reed (1988:213) suggests that the Anglo-Catholic movement that emerged in the Church of England during the first half of the 19th century had special appeal to women (and was subsequently “feminized”) because of “the subtle but continual challenges [it offered] to received patriarchal values” in Victorian society. In a similar vein, Robert Orsi (1996) argues that the cult of St. Jude, which emerged in the United States in the late 1920s, was especially appealing to second-generation Catholic women because it provided them with an organizational context in which they could discuss problems they experienced as a result of having one foot in the Old World and one foot in the New, and yet were problems that they could not (safely) raise in other contexts.

Other scholars, mainly concerned with Protestant groups, have focused on explaining male flight (i.e., why males abandoned formal participation in religious rituals). The most common argument here (see, e.g., Bonomi 1986:111–15; Westerkamp 1999:79–80) is that male flight followed on the erosion of lay leadership: as authority was increasingly turned over to a professional ministry, lay males (who had historically been predominant in the exercise of lay authority) increasingly left the religious sphere to women. The finding that feminization seems to have been highest in those colonial congregations with a long history of reliance on a settled professional ministry (Bonomi 1986:113) would seem to support this interpretation.

On the Catholic side, it seems reasonable to suggest that the 18th-century assault on the autonomy of lay confraternities in Catholic areas, by both ecclesiastical and civil authorities, is at least one of the things that similarly drove lay males from the church. This would also explain why in those few cases where lay Catholic males retained control over religious matters, male participation rates were relatively high. For example, during the early-19th century, the Penitentes—a lay brotherhood—emerged and came to flourish in northern New Mexico. Most villages and towns were home to at least one local Penitente morada (a term that refers both to the local organizational unit and to the meeting house it maintained), and only males could become officers in these local moradas and participate in their core rituals. But what is most significant about the Penitentes (again, given our concerns here) is that most adult males in each local community were active members of their local morada. (On the centrality and importance of the Penitente Brotherhood in Hispano communities, and on the increased popularity of the Brotherhood among Hispano males following the American annexation of New Mexico in 1848, see Weigle 1976; Carroll 2002.)

At this point, then, it should be clear that there are serious problems with the claim that Rodney Stark makes at the beginning of his essay (namely, that there has been little or no effort devoted to explaining why women are more religious than men). First, at least as regards the Protestant and Catholic traditions, the claim rests on a false premise given that the feminization of religious practice observed in the 19th century was clearly something recent. Second, and just as importantly, the issue of why women have been more attracted (and/or why men have been less attracted) to particular strains of Protestantism and Catholicism at particular points in history has been addressed by many scholars (and the ones mentioned in this brief comment by no means exhaust the list).

On the other hand, I concede that the focus in this comment here on the Protestant and Catholic traditions is something that limits the force of my critique. Certainly, it would be useful to have detailed information on how the feminization of lay religiosity has (or has not) varied over time in other cultural and historical contexts. The point, however, is that until we have this information, all formulations that reduce male or female religiosity to biological conditions that are invariant across cultures and historical periods simply cannot be accepted at face value.
REFERENCES
