I provide an empirical assessment of the religious commitments of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals in the United States. I compare the religiosity of gay men and lesbians and bisexuals to each other and to male and female heterosexuals, while controlling for a host of sociodemographic factors that may contribute to differences across the gender/sexuality groups. To accomplish this, I examine data from the 1991–2000 General Social Surveys (GSS). During this period, the GSS asked respondents for the sex of their sex partners over the last five years. The GSS finds that 4.3 percent of men and 3.1 percent of women report same-sex sexual partners in the five years preceding the interview—this is a larger proportion than members of “other” races, Episcopalians, or Jews. I find that gay men have high rates of religious participation, while lesbians and bisexuals have significantly lower rates of participation. Nonheterosexuals are more likely to become apostates when compared to female heterosexuals, but no more so than are heterosexual men. My findings are at odds with religious pundits who suggest that alternative sexuality mixes with religion more often for females than for males. The results are in concert with contemporary theories regarding the formation of religious preferences, and risk preferences and religiosity.

Issues of sexuality have fostered considerable questioning, controversy, and even reimagining of the nature of religion in mainline Christian denominations in the United States. While social scientists have begun to investigate some aspects of the relationship between sexuality and religious affiliation, these investigations have tended to focus on groups of homosexuals and bisexuals already engaged in religious practice (cf. Thumma 1991; Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000; Neitz 2000; Yip 1997), on denomination building by homosexual communities (Warner 1995), and on conflicts over homosexuality in denominations (cf. Anderson 1997; Wood and Bloch 1995; Beutler 1999; Ellingson et al. 2001; Koch and Curry 2000; Wellman 1999). No study has examined the religious propensities of nonheterosexuals in the general population. From popular discussions, debates, and movements, it seems that sexuality issues interact with gender to forge a new religious synthesis. This is evident both in the “reimagining” and “affirming” movements in liberal mainline Protestant denominations, as well as in new religious movements (NRMs) that amplify the importance of sexual freedom or exploration, and particularly emphasize the sexual emancipation of women from the yoke of patriarchal forms of religious expression (Daly 1967, 1978; Rudy 1999). An unspoken subtheme in the literature is the expectation that male sexuality has little spiritual bearing. Heterosexual males merely follow the lead of more pious and spiritual spouses, while homosexual males revel in the hedonism of a male-dominated subculture that only concerns itself with religion in times of dire need—such as in the HIV crisis. Hence, the key to understanding the religion-sexuality connection lies in the sexual experiences of women—lesbians and bisexual women discovering new paths to enlightenment by mixing religion and sexuality in the cauldron of their lived experiences.

While the above description is in concert with current scholarship on religion and sexuality, and fits nicely with contemporary expectations based on the experiences of leading figures in liberal Protestant denominations and new religious movements, elite-driven descriptions of reality are often wrong (Finke and Stark 1992). First, religious elites tend to focus only on issues and concerns in their own denominational groupings, ignoring the majority who fall outside their realm. Second, the perceptions of religious scholars and leaders may be influenced more by the...
appearance of organized social movements militating for recognition or novel and exciting religious movements—yet, the religious propensities and gender distribution of organized nonheterosexuals may be substantially different from the gendered religious commitments of nonheterosexuals in the general population. Even if homosexual activists in churches and in NRMs tend to be women, this does not mean that lesbians or female bisexuals have strong religious commitments, nor does it indicate that male homosexuals or bisexuals have weaker religious commitments.

In this article, I provide an empirical assessment of the religious commitments of homosexuals and bisexuals in the United States by gender. I will compare the religiosity of male and female homosexuals and bisexuals to each other and to male and female heterosexuals, while controlling for a host of sociodemographic factors that may contribute to differences across the gender/sexuality groups. To accomplish this, I examine data from the 1991–2000 General Social Surveys (GSS). During this period, the GSS asked respondents for the sex of their sex partners over the last five years. While many commentators (ranging from homosexual activists to Jesse Helms) have contended that surveys are woefully inadequate for measuring sexual behaviors, the GSS finds that 4.3 percent of men and 3.1 percent of women (3.6 percent of the total sample) report same-sex sexual partners in the five years preceding the interview. Figure 1 shows that there are more self-identified nonheterosexuals in the GSS than there are members of “other” races (who constitute 2.9 percent of the sample), Episcopalians (2.7 percent), members of the Presbyterian Church, USA (1.1 percent), Moslems, Hindus, and Buddhists (combined these account for 1.1 percent of Americans), or Jews (2.6 percent). The survey-based estimates of the proportion of nonheterosexuals may be an undercount; however, there is considerable reason to take these respondents seriously on issues of religion and sexuality—they admit to having homosexual sex.

**SEXUALITY AND RELIGION**

Social scientific research and theorizing about sexuality and religion is sparse. It is generally acknowledged that all major religious traditions have been, in practice, heterosexist—including Eastern traditions that are often mistakenly assumed to be free of heterosexism by religious pundits (cf. Bacchetta 1999; Jackson 1995). This is certainly true for Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, which together account for 90 percent of American religious affiliates (Sherkat 1999, 2001). Hence, it has been assumed that either gays, lesbians, and bisexuals must reject religion, or else they must keep their sexual preferences hidden. Below I explore both supply and demand side factors that could potentially militate against religious commitment among nonheterosexuals.
Because nonheterosexuals are reproved in virtually all religious bodies in the United States, there are substantial supply side reasons to expect that they will underconsume religion when compared to heterosexuals—no matter what their underlying preferences for supernatural compensators—the explanations and promises of otherworldly rewards that are generated by religion (Stark and Bainbridge 1987; Stark and Finke 2000). There are only a handful of the more than 2,500 American religious denominations that “affirm” homosexuality as a valid and morally supportable lifestyle. Virtually all condemn homosexuality as sin. Many of the denominations that ostensibly provide succor for homosexual members fail to avail these members with cardinal religious rituals—such as support for consensual union and ordination to positions of authority. Indeed, in all of these more liberal denominations (with the exception of the Unitarian Universalists), homosexuality is a bitterly divisive issue that taxes institutional resources and has arguably undermined congregants’ commitments to these groups—on both sides of the issue (Anderson 1997; Wood and Bloch 1995; Wellman 1999).

The supply of life-style affirming religion is supplemented through gay churches, most notably the United Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC)—a sizeable and growing gay denomination (Warner 1995; Luckenbill 1998). Yet, the UFMCC is limited in its geographic coverage and a single denomination cannot possibly satisfy the diverse religious preferences of all nonheterosexuals (cf. Finke and Stark 1992). Internal diversity within the UFMCC is limited and has been noted to create contention and schism (Luckenbill 1998). While there are many other gay churches, they suffer from liabilities of newness and resource poverty owing to their relatively small niche. Additionally, independent congregations may flounder because of the constant need for recruitment caused by a lack of fertility-related growth and socialized retention—which is the primary source of denominational growth and stability (Hout et al. forthcoming; Sherkat 2001). Problems related to a lack of fertility-generated growth are exacerbated by the potential for congregations to begin to serve particular age groups—much like other voluntary organizations—thus leading to a dying out of the congregation as it ages (cf. McPherson and Rotolo 1996).

Given the heterosexism of most religious groups, there are also demand side reasons to expect that religious commitments will be weaker among homosexuals. First, individuals who have dealt with institutions that condemn important components of their identity may reject religious identities. This is quite compatible with theories of the negotiation of multiple identities (cf.Thoits 1994, 1999; Heise 1999; Smith-Lovin 1999). Indeed, strong anti-religious impulses are present in nonheterosexual subcultures—often expressed in such things as mockery of religious orders. Whittier (1995) notes that earlier microcohorts of lesbian feminists argued that religion was incompatible with lesbianism and feminism. Second, rejection by organized religious groups will very likely diminish many nonheterosexuals’ capacities to adapt preferences for religious goods (Sherkat 1997, 1998), underconsumption of religion means that their preferences will not be conditioned by familiar religious goods. A supply side corollary is that underconsumption of religion dilutes religious human capital (Iannaccone 1990)—since nonheterosexuals have been excluded from participatory opportunities, they will be less adept at generating collective benefits in religious settings.

Third, social influences on religious choices will tend to pull nonheterosexuals away from religion. Parents, partners, and children are primary social motivations for religious participation. Yet, there is reason to believe that nonheterosexuals have more conflict with parents and other family, and would avoid participation in organizations that promote regular family ties. More transient sexual attachments and connections to less religious partners will tend to further draw nonheterosexuals away from religious commitments (Sherkat 1997; Sherkat and Wilson 1995). This contrasts with heterosexuals, who would be driven to participate in religion in order to reap positive rewards from spouses and family and avoid sanctions from religious family members. For nonheterosexuals, partners who do not want to participate may influence more religious paramours to avoid religious involvements. Lower rates of fertility will also mean that nonheterosexuals will
be less likely to retain religious commitments for the sake of children (Sherkat 1991, 1998; Sandomirsky and Wilson 1990; Sherkat and Wilson 1995).

**GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND RELIGION**

Another important factor that has gone unexplored is the relationship between gender and sexuality. Religious literature from dominant traditions strongly suggests that alternative sexual expressions have more religious significance for females. In contrast, however, existing studies of religious institution building have tended to find that while gender is a contest issue (cf. Lukenbill 1998), gay men are at least as prominent in conflicts, and as numerous in the laity (Yip 1997; Anderson 1997). Theories of religious action predict that women will be more religious than men (cf. Stark and Bainbridge 1987; Stark 2000; Miller and Hoffmann 1995), and empirical research consistently demonstrates higher levels of religious commitment among women. One important new explanation for gender differences has focused on how gender differences in risk preferences help explain commitment differentials. Risk preferences refer to the degree to which individuals are willing to accept, or even embrace, behaviors that could have negative consequences (driving fast, committing crimes, taking drugs, jumping from airplanes, etc.). Males are more accepting of risks, including the risk of not obtaining supernaturally derived benefits (or accruing supernaturally induced costs), and hence they tend to be less religious (Miller and Hoffmann 1995; Stark 2000; Miller and Stark 2000).

There are reasons to expect that lesbians and bisexual women have distinctive and substantial religious commitments. The generally patriarchal tendencies of major religious traditions invite religious innovations that provide “spiritual solutions” to a host of difficulties that women face in broader society—and marginalized sexuality is among these (Palmer 1994). Indeed, religious innovations abound, and feminist spirituality—often yoked with sexual experimentation—is arguably the most powerful movement in mainline Protestant churches (Rudy 1999; Daly 1987). Further, a variety of cult movements have come out of this feminist milieu and many of these directly advocate sexual freedom (Griffin 1999; Foltz 1999; Berger 1998; Neitz 2000). Neo-pagan new religious movements are predominately female and many advocate sexual liberty. Popular lesbian feminist writers such as Starhawk and bell hooks evoke explicit religious themes and purportedly echo the sentiments of sizable constituencies who find religious solace either through individual expressions or organized movements. In this view, women embrace novel religious forms to enable control in woman-centered movements and to provide divine sanction for alternative lifestyles that are otherwise harshly castigated in patriarchal society (cf. Palmer 1994; Neitz 2000; Griffin 1999).

In contrast, evidence that male sexual experimentation has been systematically linked to religious movements is less clear. Yet, some systematic social scientific evidence does point us toward connections between male homosexuality and religiosity. Particularly, the UFMCC is a growing and thriving denomination that is largely comprised of gay men (Warner 1995). Gender issues among homosexuals remain a point of contention in the UFMCC (cf. Lukenbill 1998). Much less systematic attention has been focused on how and why gay men might use religion (for exceptions, see Thumma 1991 and Yip 1997). However, scholars should remember that even lower rates of participation among male nonheterosexuals will likely mean higher numbers of gay men in the pews—since there are far more gay and bisexual men than there are female nonheterosexuals (Laumann et al. 1994).

Importantly, theories of religious action may generate expectations regarding the influence of both gender and sexuality on religious commitment. Psychological research has shown consistent differences in degrees of masculinity and femininity between gay and heterosexual men, and lesbians and heterosexual women (LaTorre and Wendenburg 1983; Oldham et al. 1982; Hooberman 1979; Ross 1983; Lippa and Tan 2001). Gay men are consistently demonstrated to be more androgynous, less masculine, and more feminine on psychological scales such as the Bem
Sex Role Inventory when compared to heterosexual males. Similarly, lesbians are rated as less feminine, more androgynous, and more masculine when compared with heterosexual women. If gay men are, on average, more “feminine” in their orientations toward risks, then we should expect them to be more religious than heterosexual men. In contrast, if lesbians are more masculine in their risk-taking orientations, we should expect them to be less religious than heterosexual women, and perhaps even less religious than gay men (cf. Miller and Hoffmann 1995; Miller and Stark 2000). This is a stark contrast to what would be expected if one took for granted the perspectives bandied about by religious elites. The dominant view tends to assume that since we have prominent lesbian and bisexual religious intellects such as Mary Daly, bell hooks, Starhawk, and Sallie McFague, and no corresponding gay male religious elites, this must mean that gay men are uninterested in religion.

Theory and research imply several testable hypotheses regarding the relationship between sexuality and religious commitment:

**Hypothesis 1:** Nonheterosexuals will have lower levels of religious commitment compared to heterosexuals.

**Hypothesis 2:** Part of the relationship between nonheterosexuality and religious commitment will be explained by differences in social influences such as marriage and childrearing.

If the real world resembles the elites from theological movements regarding sexuality at the American Academy of Religion, or the constituencies of Wiccan and neo-pagan new religious movements, then we should expect that:

**Hypothesis 3:** Lesbians and bisexual women will have higher levels of religious commitment than male non-heterosexuals.

However, if risk preferences vary according to levels of masculinity-femininity, and if these correspond to homosexuality in a sex-specific pattern, then we should expect that:

**Hypothesis 4:** Gay men will be more religious than lesbians.

**Data and Measures**

Since 1991, the General Social Surveys have asked respondents about the sex of their sexual partners in the last five years. I use data from the 1991–2000 GSS to assess differences in religious commitment for respondents in six gender/sexuality groupings: (1) heterosexual females; (2) heterosexual males; (3) bisexual females; (4) bisexual males; (5) lesbian females; and (6) gay males. While I use the identity labels that are politically preferred, I note that my measure of sexuality is behavioral rather than self-identification. Some self-identified gays and lesbians may have had no sex partners in the last five years, or may have had sex with people of the opposite sex (and hence be classified as bisexuals in my study). Similarly, behavioral bisexuals may identify themselves as heterosexuals if asked about their sexual identity. This study is breaking new ground in assessing the relationship between behavioral sexuality and religiosity, and must leave the question of religiosity and sexual identity for future work. A nontrivial (5.2 percent) proportion of the sample refused to answer questions about sex partners, and I employ a dummy indicator for missing on sex of sex partner in the multivariate analyses to account for this.

**Religious Commitment**

I investigate four indicators of religious commitment. Church attendance is measured from never (0), to almost every day (8). Apostasy is indicated by a dummy variable and defined as
having no religious affiliation at the time of the interview, while claiming an affiliation when the respondent was growing up. Frequency of prayer is coded to run from never (0) to several times a day (5). I also investigate biblical belief commitments using agreement that the Bible is either the inspired or actual word of God.

Control Variables

In the multivariate results in Table 2, I control for race (African-American = 1, others = 0), education (in years), age, marital status (married = 1, others = 0), and number of children. Notably, 24 percent of nonheterosexuals are married (compared to 57 percent for heterosexuals), and on average nonheterosexuals have 1.0 children (compared to 1.8 for heterosexual GSS respondents).

RESULTS

Table 1 presents the unadjusted means and percentages across the six sexuality groupings. As expected, heterosexual women are significantly more active participants in religious organizations when compared with any of the other gender/sexuality groupings. Interestingly, however, gay men and male heterosexuals have similar rates of church attendance. Because of the relatively small size of many of the gender/sexuality groupings, only the difference between gay men and bisexual women is significant, and, in concert with Hypothesis 4, gay men have higher rates of church participation. Gay men also have higher rates of participation than lesbians or bisexual men, though these differences are not significant. Also in concert with Hypothesis 4, female nonheterosexuals (bisexuals and lesbians) are less active in religious organizations when compared to their male counterparts (bisexual men and gay men).

Frequency of prayer follows a similar pattern. Female heterosexuals are more prayerful than others; however, gay men are not significantly less devout on this indicator. Further, male homosexuals pray more often than male heterosexuals (the difference approaches significance at the 0.05 level). Again, among nonheterosexuals, bisexuals are least pious, and lesbians are less prayerful than gay men.

TABLE 1
SEXUALITY AND RELIGIOUS COMMITMENT IN THE GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEYS: UNADJUSTED MEANS AND PERCENTAGES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female Heterosexual</th>
<th>Male Heterosexual</th>
<th>Female Bisexual</th>
<th>Male Bisexual</th>
<th>Lesbian</th>
<th>Gay Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Church attendance</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>3.28aa</td>
<td>2.36aabb</td>
<td>2.86aa</td>
<td>2.84aa</td>
<td>3.21aacc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of prayer</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>4.48aa</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>4.66</td>
<td>4.52</td>
<td>4.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apostate</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>11.1%aa</td>
<td>15.7%aa</td>
<td>15.1%a</td>
<td>19.2%aabb</td>
<td>18.8%aabb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bible actual or inspired word of God</td>
<td>85.5%</td>
<td>77.8%aa</td>
<td>69.4%aa</td>
<td>60.7%aabb</td>
<td>69.3%aa</td>
<td>68.1%aab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>5,620</td>
<td>4,713</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: N* reflects the total valid N for religious affiliation. Ns for Prayer and Bible beliefs are lower because of GSS schedules.

a = difference from female heterosexual significant at 0.05 level, two tailed.
aa = difference from female heterosexual significant at 0.01 level, two tailed.
b = difference from male heterosexual significant at 0.05 level, two tailed.
bb = difference from male heterosexual significant at 0.01 level, two tailed.
c = difference from bisexual female significant at 0.05 level, two tailed.
c = difference from bisexual female significant at 0.01 level, two tailed.
TABLE 2
ADJUSTED MEAN CHURCH ATTENDANCE AND PREDICTED PROBABILITY OF APOSTASY FOR GENDER/SEXUALITY GROUPINGS CONTROLLING FOR SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female Heterosexual</th>
<th>Male Heterosexual</th>
<th>Gay Male</th>
<th>Other Nonheterosexuals</th>
<th>Missing on Sex of Sex Partners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Church attendance¹</td>
<td>3.809bbbddd</td>
<td>3.365aaacc</td>
<td>3.814bbd</td>
<td>3.240aaac</td>
<td>4.031bbbddd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apostate²</td>
<td>0.063bbbccddd</td>
<td>0.099aaa</td>
<td>0.131aaa</td>
<td>0.124aaa</td>
<td>0.057bbbccddd</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ Calculated from OLS regression model, controlling for age, education, race, marital status, no religious affiliation, and number of children.
² Calculated from logistic regression model, controlling for age, education, race, marital status, and number of children.

a Difference from female heterosexual significant at 0.05 level, one tailed.
aa Difference from female heterosexual significant at 0.05 level, two tailed.
aaa Difference from female heterosexual significant at 0.01 level, two tailed.
b Difference from male heterosexual significant at 0.05 level, one tailed.
bb Difference from male heterosexual significant at 0.05 level, two tailed.
bbb Difference from male heterosexual significant at 0.01 level, two tailed.
c Difference from male homosexual significant at 0.05 level, one tailed.
cb Difference from male homosexual significant at 0.05 level, two tailed.
ccc Difference from male homosexual significant at 0.01 level, two tailed.
d Difference from other nonheterosexual significant at 0.05 level, one tailed.
dd Difference from other nonheterosexual significant at 0.05 level, two tailed.
ddd Difference from other nonheterosexual significant at 0.01 level, two tailed.

Despite their high commitment on church attendance and prayer, gay males are significantly more likely to be apostates when compared to heterosexual women or men. Lesbians are also significantly more likely to have left religion when compared to heterosexual women or men (with a slightly higher defection rate than gay men). Bisexual women and men also leave the faith at fairly high rates, differing significantly from heterosexual women. These results are consistent with supply and demand side theories that generate Hypothesis 1, that nonheterosexuals will be less committed to religion.

Nonheterosexuals have less faith that the Bible is the inspired or absolute word of God when compared to heterosexual women or men. Lesbians are also significantly more likely to have left religion when compared to heterosexual women or men (with a slightly higher defection rate than gay men). Bisexual women and men also leave the faith at fairly high rates, differing significantly from heterosexual women. These results are consistent with supply and demand side theories that generate Hypothesis 1, that nonheterosexuals will be less committed to religion.

Nonheterosexuals have less faith that the Bible is the inspired or absolute word of God when compared to heterosexual women, and both gay men and bisexual men are significantly less orthodox in their views of the Bible when compared to male heterosexuals. Male heterosexuals are also less confident in the divine origins of scripture when compared to female heterosexuals. The percentages agreeing that the Bible is divinely inspired are virtually identical for female bisexuals, lesbians, and male homosexuals. Interestingly, even among male bisexuals, the least religious group on this indicator, over 60 percent believe that the Bible was divinely inspired.

Table 2 presents the multivariate results for church attendance and for apostasy. For church attendance, I present predicted means for each group from an OLS regression model, while for apostasy I present predicted probabilities from a logistic regression model (evaluated at the mean of other covariates). I exclude prayer from these analyses because significant differences were not found in the bivariate results presented above (and multivariate controls did not alter those findings), while belief in the Bible is not examined because this item was not asked to the entire sample, making comparisons across smaller groupings prohibitive. Based on the results of the bivariate analyses, I combine the gender/sexuality categories for bisexuals and for homosexual females. This allows for more stable results and comparisons with male homosexuals—who are
distinctive in their higher levels of church attendance. I also present the adjusted mean level of church attendance and the predicted probability of apostasy for those who are missing on the indicator of the sex of sex partners.

Controlling for other factors, I find that female heterosexuals are significantly more active in religious groups when compared to male heterosexuals and nonheterosexuals (bisexuals and lesbians). However, male homosexuals have almost the same rates of attendance as heterosexual females when controls for demographic factors are taken into account. Further, male homosexuals are significantly more active in religious organizations than male heterosexuals and other nonheterosexuals. Those who refused to answer questions about sexuality reported higher levels of religious activity—roughly equaling the religious exploits of heterosexual females.

In the multivariate analyses, heterosexual females also had significantly lower predicted probabilities of apostasy compared to male heterosexuals, gay men, or other nonheterosexuals. However, the latter three groups were largely indistinguishable in their propensity to leave the faith. Those who refused to answer questions about sex were less likely to be apostates compared to heterosexual men and nonheterosexuals.

In sum, when the influence of demographic factors is taken into account, gay men are more avid religious participants than male heterosexuals and other nonheterosexuals, and are similar to female heterosexuals in their rates of religious participation. In concert with Hypothesis 2, some of the difference in religiosity between heterosexuals and nonheterosexuals is explained by family factors that socially constrain heterosexuals’ religious behaviors. Thus, I find that with the introduction of multivariate controls, nonheterosexuals’ adjusted means for church attendance increase, while predicted probabilities of apostasy decrease.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

If we pay attention to developments in liberal Christian theology, controversies in liberal Protestant denominations, and developments in the new religious movements, we would expect that female nonheterosexuals would be more committed to religious participation than are gay and bisexual men. What I have shown is that in fact gay men are more active in religious groups than are lesbians and bisexual women. Second, I have shown that nonheterosexuals have indistinguishable rates of apostasy across gender. Given that gay men are substantially more numerous than their female counterparts (GSS data confirms this well-known expectation), there are certainly many more gay and bisexual men in religious organizations than there are lesbians and bisexual women. Third, gay men are significantly more active in their religious participation than are lesbians or bisexual women—or even male heterosexuals once demographic factors are taken into account.

Female alternative sexuality cannot be easily wedded to extant religious traditions. The notable developments in neo-paganism and feminist spirituality are small new religious movements. Indeed, Sherkat (1999) found that only nine out of 33,671 respondents claimed affiliation with a pagan or Wiccan group, and only 0.2 percent of Americans claim affiliation with nontraditional new religious movements. Most individuals will not be attracted to novel religious expressions, and hence new religious offerings that reconcile female nonheterosexuality with supernatural compensators will be unlikely to attract large followings (cf. Stark and Bainbridge 1985, 1987). The feminist reimagining of religion that is taking place in “affirming” churches largely fails to correspond to the religious preferences of most people. These new directions for liberal Christianity are, essentially, cult movements within churches, adding goddess worship to the trinity of gods in traditional Christianity, or jettisoning the trinity in favor of a goddess.

Further, women’s understandings of the nature of religion are forged in patriarchal systems of belief. Women who reject patriarchy will almost certainly identify religion as a key institutional support of patriarchy, and may see this relationship as invariable. This was clearly the case for many in early generations of feminists (cf. Whittier 1995, 1997). In contrast, male-focused themes and advocacy of intimacy between men abounds in Christianity. While homosexuality is certainly
considered sinful, so are premarital sex, adultery, lying, coveting, and other common human behaviors. Importantly, this male-focused religion also offers the opportunity of salvation from sin, even the sin of homosexuality, and salvation comes at the hands of a loving male god (Jesus). There is no comforting mother goddess in any of the major religious traditions (a lone exception may be Mary in Catholicism; however, the virgin Mary rejects all sexuality).

An important finding of this study is that gay men are more active in religious organizations than are heterosexual men, once other factors are taken into account. Heterosexual men’s ties to heterosexual women constrain men’s religious choices. If it were not for marriage and family reasons, the average heterosexual man would attend church far less often than the average homosexual man. Social constraints on choices force heterosexual men into the pews, while gay men come more willingly—participating to the same extent as heterosexual women.

Alan Miller, John Hoffman, and Rodney Stark (Miller and Hoffman 1995; Miller and Stark 2000; Stark 2000) have an intriguing potential explanation: it is possible that gay men have preferences for risk of eternal sanctions that are more like those of heterosexual women. In contrast, lesbians may have risk preferences that are more akin to those of heterosexual men. Here, masculinity predisposes people to accept risk and take chances that might have negative consequences, and my findings suggest that masculinity and risk preferences may be negatively associated with male homosexuality and positively associated with lesbianism. These findings are also suggestive of examinations of the impact of prenatal hormones on gendered behavior, where it has been shown that prenatal testosterone levels (among other things) lower gendered behavior in adulthood and mitigate the effects of gender socialization on women (Udry 2000). Insofar as biological factors may play a role in sexuality, these influences should also impact gendered orientations toward risk that have been shown to influence religiosity. Notably, risk preferences that underlie religious commitment may also help explain a host of findings regarding the impact of religion on crime and deviance, marriage and divorce, and health and well-being. Risk takers are more likely to commit crimes, have extramarital affairs, smoke, drink, take drugs, and the like, and much of the impact of religiosity on these outcomes could instead be a function of risk taking.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Versions of this paper were presented at the 2000 Annual Meetings of the Religious Research Association, Houston, Texas, and at the Conference on Religion and Family at Princeton University. Data from the NORC General Social Surveys were made available through the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research. I thank an anonymous reviewer, Alan Miller, Rodney Stark, and Ron Lawson for comments.

REFERENCES


