

The Gendered Religious Response to State Action on the Coronavirus Pandemic

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State action to curtail the spread of the coronavirus has meant advising, and sometimes mandating, houses of worship to close to in-person worship. While mostly cooperative, the religious response has been varied and has exposed a hardened, defiant core. Informed by gendered religious worldviews, religious defiance is led by men and disproportionately supported by men. In this article, we document the extent of the defiance as of late March 2020 with our survey data and then investigate how gendered religious worldviews serve to track men to public roles and women to private ones. We attempt to confirm the nature of these effects with a gendered nationalism item and parallel gender gaps in political participation.

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The coronavirus pandemic has caused seismic rifts in every part of American society. One of the most visible results of the coronavirus is that it has shown how religious Americans, who often hold a cooperative orientation toward government, can sometimes express

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hardened opposition to state coordination. While women dominate religious involvement, in numbers at least, the oppositional religious response to public health measures has been strongly gendered and led by men. For instance, Tony Spell, a pastor in Louisiana, made national news for chartering 26 buses to bring people to his church the week after his state instituted a shelter-in-place order (Rocha 2020). That decision led him to be placed on house arrest (Harmeet, Sutton, and Grisham 2020). In this brief article, we examine how conservative religious beliefs help generate a differential response to the idea of government orders surrounding religious behavior. Notably, a proxy for complementarianism (biblical literalism), which is the ideology that men and women have separate but complementary roles in society, erodes women's defiance of the state while dramatically increasing men's. We also find evidence that gendered nationalism is triggered by church closures. Together, these findings show how gender and gender ideology are at the core of religion and politics in the United States.

GENDER, RELIGION, AND PUBLIC LIFE

Research on religion often faces the seeming paradox that religious institutions are dominated by women and yet women so seldomly appear in leadership roles, unable to crack through the "stained-glass ceiling" (e.g., Chaves 1997; Djupe and Olson 2013). Women are typically more religious than men (e.g., Sullins 2006), which means that religious teachings on gender roles and gender expectations are especially impactful (Eliason et al. 2017; Petersen and Donnenwerth 1998). Some religious teachings influence a skewed power dynamic in marriage, justifying it with religious teachings about the special role of women, which is best described as complementarian (e.g., Perry and Grubbs 2020).

This socialization has far-reaching effects and is more common in families that are more religious (Kelley and Graaf 1997). Research has shown that as women's religion becomes more hierarchical, their views on gender become more traditional, with increases in "body shame, self-silencing behaviors, hostile sexism, and benevolent sexism," which are stronger among conservative people with less education (Baker and Whitehead 2016; Eliason et al. 2017, 3). Gender not only affects women's roles within their house of worship. Women's investment in religious organizations does not result in the same civic payoffs as it does

for men (Djupe, Sokhey, and Gilbert 2007; Friesen and Djupe 2017). Other research has concluded that nations with lower levels of religiosity have greater gender equality (Schnabel 2016).

This is not to say that women do not feel efficacious through their religious involvement, which appears to hinge on the worldviews adopted as a result (e.g., Griffith 1997). Evangelical, fundamentalist, and Pentecostal identifiers are more likely to take up comprehensive religious worldviews, outlining rules for life and the allocation of resources and power (Ammerman 1987, 1991; Bartkowski 1996; Ellison and Sherkat 1993; Malley 2004; Sewell 1992; Sherkat and Ellison 1997), which are overwhelmingly gendered. Strict interpretation of religious texts connects with gendered notions of religious authority (Cassese and Holman 2017). It has also been linked repeatedly to conservative political attitudes, which are often generated and perpetuated as an antidote to the perception that society has become increasingly sinful (Bader and Froese 2005; Cottone, Drucker, and Javier 2007; Ellison and Sherkat 1993).

A core part of this worldview that relies on a literal interpretation of the Bible (e.g., from 1 Peter 2:11–12 or Ephesians 5:22) is that it prohibits women from holding positions of power (Bendroth 2001; Chaves 1997). However, women are more likely both to adopt a literalist worldview and to use this to their advantage as a “compensatory control” mechanism (Giddens 1984; Hoffmann and Bartkowski 2008). That is, religious women take on a biblical literalist worldview in order to assert themselves to their male counterparts and secure their position as legitimate and beneficial members of the church community (Brasher 1998; Griffith 1997; Pevey, Williams, and Ellison 1996; Stacey and Gerard 1990; Wolkomir 2004). However, an important consequence is that such a worldview, even as it insulates women from criticism in the church, also serves to isolate them from public life. This dynamic also serves to connect men’s gender identity to the church as men become the defenders of the faith in the public sphere.

In this way, patterns within houses of worship can be illuminated by previous work that has considered more general, gendered power dynamics (Mayer 2012; Peterson 1999). For instance, while higher social dominance orientation (SDO) tends to be linked to more political activity, it actually opens up a gender gap in which high-SDO women participate less than men, a pattern linked to the patriarchal institutions in which SDO is fostered (Djupe, Friesen, and Sokhey 2017). A consistent gendered political worldview played out visibly in the 2016 election, when people, especially men, who feel that “America has

grown too soft and feminine” were much more likely to vote for Donald Trump (Deckman and Cassese 2019). Overall, the differences in what Deckman and Cassese call “gendered nationalism” are essential to capture in order to understand current American politics. But the notion of a normative militant, masculine Christianity, perhaps best symbolized by John Wayne, is not new and has been building for generations within white evangelicalism (Du Mez 2020).

The response to government reaction to the novel coronavirus pandemic is likely to tap into the confluence of gender, religion, and politics. Previous work on the gendered dynamics of authority and role-taking in certain religious traditions can help us understand the gendered response to church closure orders. We do not expect that men and women inhabit different religious institutions, but we expect that their responses to house of worship closures will be distinguishable. That is, men and women do not differ in their defiant response because of their religiosity but because of their gendered religious worldviews that serve to demarcate appropriate spheres of influence. In particular, religiously observant men with a literalist worldview as the “rightful” public representatives will be more defiant than similarly situated women. After a direct test, we attempt to confirm the nature of this effect in two ways: (1) by assessing whether gendered nationalism is producing the same pattern and (2) by assessing whether literalism is linked to gender gaps in political participation and support for women clergy.

DATA AND MEASUREMENT

The source of our data is a survey collected from March 23 to 27, 2020, which was a few weeks before the peak of the coronavirus epidemic in the United States, although most states had issued stay-at-home orders that limited gathering sizes, encouraging almost all churches to suspend worship services. The total sample size for the survey was 3,100. The sample was collected through Qualtrics Panels, which recruits from a variety of panel maintainers, using a nonprobability quota system set by U.S. Census Bureau distributions on age, race, region, and gender (see, e.g., Boas, Christenson, and Glick 2020).¹ The survey included a

1. Boas, Christenson, and Glick (2020) find that data from Qualtrics Panels surveys provide “valid inferences,” though they often are not representative on political dimensions — a concern that the Census Bureau quotas help alleviate (see also AAPOR 2020). Moreover, we eliminated those who took the survey too fast and those who failed attention checks.

number of questions about how respondents felt about the coronavirus, how they reacted to the pandemic, as well as how their churches had responded to and should respond to the outbreak.

RESULTS

According to these results from late March (see [Figure 1](#)), nearly 90% of house of worship attenders indicated that their house of worship had canceled services, and nearly three in five reported that they were worshipping online as a replacement. But men were more than twice as likely to say that they were continuing to attend worship services in person (28.5% versus 12.3%), and nearly a third of men said that their church was encouraging worship during the shelter-in-place order (32.9%), which is 14 percentage points higher than women (18.6%). We reconcile these findings by understanding the response more as an indicator of defiance than as a measure of behavior.

We now turn to specific questions related to freedom to worship amid the coronavirus pandemic, using the entire sample (see [Figure 2](#)). There are multiple areas where a tremendous gender gap emerges on these measures. As was the case in [Figure 1](#), the differences between genders are statistically significant for each of the four questions. For instance, 35% of women strongly disagreed that “freedom to worship is too important to close church services,” The share was just 20.2% of men. In

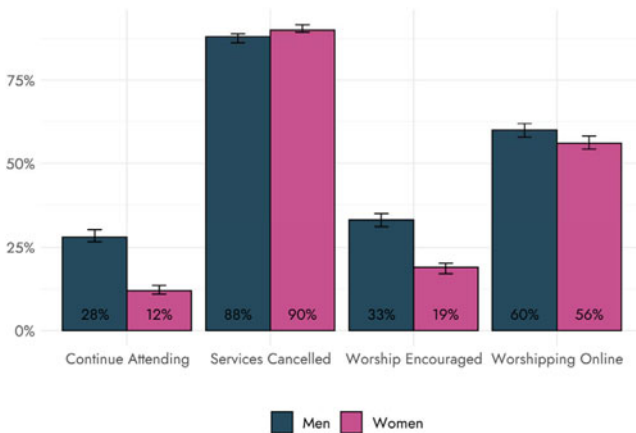


FIGURE 1. Religious behavior change due to the coronavirus.

Source: 2020 Religion and C19 Survey, full sample.

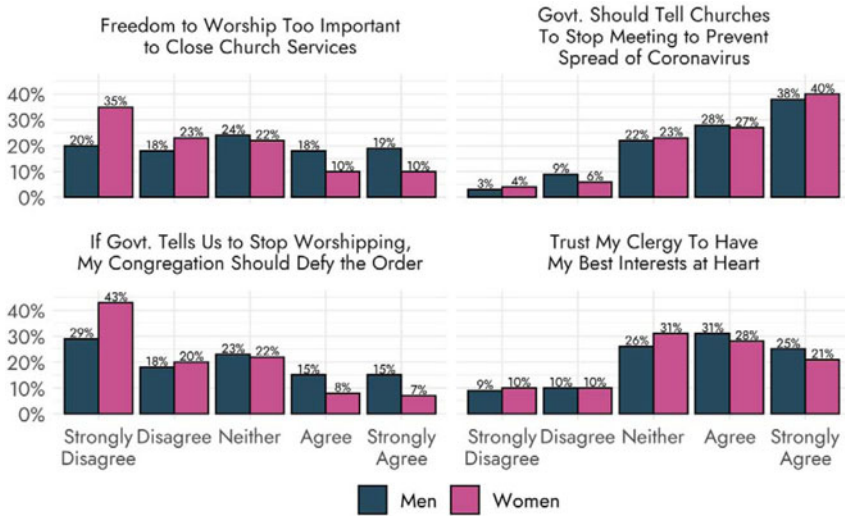


FIGURE 2. Views of religious freedom amid the coronavirus pandemic. *Source:* 2020 Religion and C19 Survey, full sample.

much the same way, 43.3% of women strongly disagreed that their congregation should defy a government order to stop worshipping, compared with only 28.7% of men.

The gender gap was small (if still significant) when asked whether “the government should tell churches to stop meeting to prevent coronavirus.” Women were just 1 percentage point more likely to agree than men. However, when we asked respondents whether they “trust my clergy to have my best interests at heart,” women were less likely to answer in the affirmative than men, for whom the most popular choice was the middle option.

The survey included an explicit statement of defiance: “If the government tells us to stop worshipping, my congregation should defy the order.” Women were much less likely to agree (15% versus 29%). We suspect men apply their faith to this question differently, which we tested by interacting gender with attendance and biblical literalism (see Figure 3; full results are available in Table A1 in the online appendix).² Church attendance has long been seen as a means to gauge exposure to religious messaging as well as a

2. Literalism captures fundamentalist thinking at one end, believing that the Bible should be followed literally, word for word. On the other end are those who believe that the Bible is just a book written by men.



FIGURE 3. How gendered religious worldviews structure defiance of state orders. *Source:* 2020 Religion and C19 Survey

Note: Comparison of any two confidence intervals is equivalent of a 90% test of significance at the point of overlap.

proxy for commitment to a religious tradition (Kellstedt et al. 1996; Layman 2001). The logit model included controls for race, age, partisanship, income, religious tradition, and education.³

At each level of biblical literalism, women were consistently less supportive of government defiance than men, and the gap increased with more literal views (though, in each case, men effectively doubled women's rate of defiance). Greater attendance led to stronger support for defying the government in order to hold worship services at all three levels of literalism, though it is notable how this depended on gender. There was no significant impact of attendance on support for defiance among literalist women – the raw amount of change for literalist women only trailed women in the other three panels by a few percentage points, though. For literalist men, the effect was strongly positive, moving from 17% supportive among those who never attend to 40% for those who attend multiple times per week. We take this as evidence supportive of our theory that attendance will serve as a reinforcing mechanism but that response is also clearly shaped by gender.

We also wanted to test for the effect of a more explicit gendered worldview using the gendered nationalism question as a key independent variable interacted with gender. We asked respondents whether they believed that the United States is becoming feminized and weak (Deckman and Cassese 2019). The logit models included the same

3. Full variable coding is available in the appendix.



FIGURE 4. Gendered nationalism and defying government orders.

Source: 2020 Religion and C19 Survey

Note: Comparison of any two confidence intervals is equivalent of a 90% test of significance at the point of overlap.

independent variables used in the prior model, as well as controls for literalism and church attendance (full results are available in Table A2 in the appendix).

Clearly, gendered nationalism drives up the opinion that churches should defy the government's orders to reopen (left panel of Figure 4). For those who strongly disagreed with this statement, just 5% believed that defiance was a good idea. Among those who strongly agreed that America is being feminized, 22% of women and 31% of men believed that churches should defy the government. While the figure indicates that the gender differences in the effect of gendered nationalism are mild, it is important to understand that women are consistently and considerably less likely to adopt gendered nationalist views (the gap is the same across literalist views). The right panel of Figure 4 indicates that the combination of church closures and gendered nationalism predicted much larger support for government defiance. Among respondents who indicated that their church had been closed, gendered nationalism drives support for defiance, from just under 5% for those at the bottom end of the scale to 35% for those who expressed the highest level of gendered nationalism. This effect helps highlight that many were responding strongly to specific personal circumstances and not some abstract idea.

It is possible that women are socialized to acquiesce to men, to the church, and, by extension, to public authorities, whereas men are socialized to lead and defy attempts to intrude. Alternatively, our

argument is more expansive, that a complementarian worldview carves out separate spaces that extend beyond particular leadership decisions. Evidence supportive of both positions comes from opinions (in these data) on whether women should be able to preach from the pulpit. Women tend to be more supportive than men regardless of worship attendance, but literalism undermines that support so that literalist women have the same agreement levels as men (see Figure A1 in the appendix). Outside of a leadership context, though, we found that the same combination of literalism and attendance opens a wide gender gap in an index of political participation. We believe that the evidence is consistent with our separate spaces notion since it extends beyond the confines of the acquiescence hypothesis (see Figure A2 in the appendix).

CONCLUSION

There is no united religious response to the coronavirus pandemic or to the governments' variegated efforts to minimize the spread of the virus. Most religious Americans cooperated with orders or suggestions to socially distance and not worship in person. However, a distinct minority took a defiant stance, and that response was gendered — men were more likely to indicate defiant behaviors and to take defiant attitudes. Similarly, religious women — those with frequent church attendance with literal interpretations of the Bible — did not join them. This illustrates a consistent finding in the literature that such religious styles serve to set men and women on different tracks, with men pointed to the public sphere and women remaining in private.

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view the supplementary appendices for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X20000306>

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