CHAPTER 5

Gender and Atheism: Paradoxes, Contradictions, and an Agenda for Future Research


While once a dominant paradigm in the sociology of religion, secularization theory gave way to work on pluralism, globalization, multiple modernities, and intercultural phenomena. Following recent social change and growing secularization in some contexts, however, more sociologists of religion are now addressing atheism. The empirical research addressing gender is still limited and theoretical synthesis of the available evidence is even rarer. This paper, therefore, will cover what research is available on gender and atheism, focusing primarily on the United States, but situating the American experience within a global context. Because of the limited availability of research on gender and atheism, we will also incorporate our own original research on the topic.

Scholars of religion know there is a gender imbalance among atheists, with men much more likely than women to be atheists. This imbalance is likely a contributing factor to popular discussions that have accused atheism – and secularism more generally – of a sexism problem. This paper will cover the available literature on gender and atheism, focusing on the paradoxes and contradictions of equality and inequality in secular communities: although typically more liberal than the religious on many social issues, the nonreligious are not immune to misleading assumptions about gender or sexist thoughts and actions. Of particular interest to us is why, in contradiction to the assertions of some atheists leaders, the absence of religion does not spontaneously produce equality. Because the empirical literature is far from complete, this paper will of necessity be an agenda setting treatment that highlights the need for more research.

We will first discuss the gender gap in religion and atheism. Then we will cover the contradictions of inequality and equality within secular communities and discourse, focusing primarily on the U.S. Next, we will provide a brief discussion of gender and atheism outside the U.S. We will then discuss how epistemology, language, and knowledge help to situate the paradoxes and

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contradictions covered in the chapter. Finally, we will close with directions for future research and concluding thoughts.

The Gender Gap in Religiosity and Atheism

Even though the nonreligious tend to have more liberal gender attitudes (Schnabel 2016; Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006; Stinson et al. 2013) and the proportion of atheists and agnostics in a country is associated with greater gender equality (Schnabel Forthcoming), women are less likely than men to be nonreligious and, comparatively, even less likely to identify as atheists.

Although not a universal phenomenon, women being more religious than men is one of the most consistent findings in the sociology of religion (Hastings and Lindsay 2013; Luckmann 1967; Miller and Hoffmann 1995; Miller and Stark 2002; Roth and Kroll 2007; Schnabel 2015; Stark 2002; Trzebiatowska and Bruce 2012; de Vaus and McAllister 1987). The other side of the equation is that men tend to be less religious than women, and men make up a disproportionate number of those who have no religious affiliation and those who do not believe in a god or gods. Figure 1 uses data from the 2014 U.S. General Social Survey.

![Gender gaps in affiliation with Christian denominations and in being religiously unaffiliated](image)

**Figure 1**  
Gender gaps in affiliation with Christian denominations and in being religiously unaffiliated  
Source: 2014 General Social Survey  
N=2,507  
Note: Cases were equalized by gender for comparison. Non-Christian religious affiliations not shown.