Gen Z Men Are Going Back to Church. Why?

Young men are increasingly more religious. Young women are leaving the church in droves. Their motivations might not be so different.

By Jill Filipovic, *Slate*, Oct 11, 2024

Something strange is going on with young men in America. For decades, young voters have leaned left compared to older ones: Millennials remain the most liberal generation of American adults, and as more zoomers reach adulthood, they seem set to surpass even their predecessors' liberalism. A related shift in religiosity is also underway, with millennials being the least religious generation in American history, and members of Gen Z similarly moving away from organized faith traditions.

But within these macro trends, a divide has cleaved open. Among zoomers, young men are now more religious than young women—and women have defected from the Christian faith in larger numbers than young men. And while men, in general, are slightly more conservative than women, young men seem to be much more conservative than young women, especially as young women have banked hard to the left. And the youngest voters—those under the age of 25—may even be more conservative than voters ages 25 to 30.

According to a broad survey conducted by the American Enterprise Institute, zoomer men are also less likely to identify as feminists than millennial men, even while zoomer women are more likely to be feminists than millennial women. And young men are more likely than older ones to say men in America face some or a lot of discrimination.

Behind all of these trends—women becoming more liberal and moving away from religion and motherhood, men moving toward religiosity and conservativism and away from feminism—may be the same deeper motivation: a search for some kind of structure or purpose.

That pursuit looks very different for both of these cohorts because of real changes in each group's circumstances, social position, and life prospects. In the U.S., women are simultaneously doing better than ever before and enjoying historic opportunities for education and work while also seeing their most basic rights—chief among them the right to determine the number and spacing of their children—not only contested but broadly constrained.

Young men, on the other hand, seem comparatively more out to sea. They still enjoy vast social and economic benefits compared to women, but a nation in which there is less discrimination against women is also a nation in which there are fewer unearned advantages for men. They're also lonely: Social isolation and feelings of alienation are increasingly common. And compared to young women, young men are less likely to rely on friends or romantic partners for support, leaning instead on their parents, who they are also more likely to live with.

The factors pushing young women away from religion, conservatism, and traditional family structures are obvious. Many of the United States' most popular Christian denominations are overtly sexist; Catholics, Mormons, and Southern Baptists all bar women from top leadership roles. And though the messaging differs wildly from congregation to congregation, conservative Christian churches generally push a traditional ideology of gender difference, with men as household heads and economic forces, and women as more naturally tasked with motherhood and child-rearing. It's no surprise that 65 percent of women under 30 say that churches do not treat men and women equally. Why would the more feminist young women of today opt into institutions that make them second-class citizens?

Young women are also coming of age in a nation in which rights their mothers took for granted are under attack. Abortion bans, which have passed into law in most Republican-led states, don't just impinge upon women's most fundamental rights; they also send a message that conservative lawmakers do not trust women with their own bodies and that our primary purpose is reproduction. They also leave women imperiled even if they do want children, as evidenced by the fact that most women who have abortions are already mothers and many others will go on to have children later—as well as the rush of stories of pregnant women being denied basic medical care in red-state

hospitals and nearly losing their lives (or, in some devastating cases, dying needlessly).

Strong opposition to abortion rights is tightly tied to religiosity, and particularly to various strains of Christianity. No wonder young women are fleeing both church and the GOP: Both have proven dangerous to women's health, rights, and autonomy.

For young men, the calculus is different. Men benefit from parenthood in ways women do not—having a child doesn't add nearly as much at-home work to their plates, but it does mean they get paid more. For women, it's the opposite. The same churches and conservative politics that have sent women running tell men that their rightful place is at the top of the household and political and economic hierarchies, and often, that their birthrights (power, authority, respect) have been unfairly usurped.

But there's something else at play, too. Young people generally say that their lives lack purpose and meaning. Conservative Christian churches may skew sexist, but they are also institutions that offer human connection, foster friendships, and tell adherents that they are beloved and part of a larger plan. They offer clear rules for living a good and moral life. For a lonely young man, this kind of structure and socialization doesn't just appeal, it brings tangible benefits.

The rise in young male religiosity has also dovetailed with a subculture of young men whose politics are informed by bro podcasters and social media stars whose sexism ranges from light and surreptitious to overt and hostile—sometimes referred to as the media "manosphere." This also does not seem to be a coincidence, even as young religious men may not be the same ones listening to Jordan Peterson, Joe Rogan, or Andrew Tate.

The bro-y media-makers, the Republican Party, and the church all have different ways of promising young men clarity, meaning, and respect, and all seek to be the salve to these men's sense of displacement and aggrievement. And there is a germ of truth and some real value to what they offer. Jordan Peterson telling young men to make their beds is teaching them about order, consistency, and adult responsibility. Conservative churches may put men at the top of the family hierarchy, but they also tell men they are responsible for supporting their families and being upstanding members of their communities. In a culture awash with digital media, where one can find anything one desires but very little of what one actually needs—where we are all inundated with what feels like constant meaningless noise and pointless conflict—it's not hard to see the appeal of traditional institutions that draw hard lines between right and wrong, offer guidance and comfort, and that promise that if you behave well, you will be rewarded.

It is in many ways a good thing that young men are seeking out in-real-life connection and moral philosophies that help them to make sense and meaning out of their lives. It's a shame, though, that the conservative churches too many of them gravitate toward have so thoroughly alienated women with their misogyny. These more religious, more conservative men and less religious, more liberal women are not exactly primed to connect with each other, furthering the societal gender divide that appears to be growing.

Perhaps, as Gen Z ages, men and women alike will move toward the middle, and more of them will find each other (or some semblance of commonality). But right now, the same institutions pulling men in are pushing women out. And that might be particularly disastrous for the same men these organizations and individuals are ostensibly trying to help.