

First Comes Marriage: American Religion's Dependence on the Family

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In the last half-century, an unprecedented family revolution swept across the United States, with dramatic increases in divorce, non-marital childbearing, cohabitation, and singlehood. Given that American religious traditions have devoted substantial teaching, preaching, and pastoral resources over much of the nation's history to supporting marriage and parenthood, this family revolution has threatened—and continues to threaten—the institutional survival of religion in the United States.

The challenge posed by the family revolution stems from the fact that religious organizations depend in no small part on the institutions of marriage and family to successfully socialize children into these organizations and to orient adults to the moral, social, and spiritual goods that the organizations offer. Moreover, because the push toward religion that intact, married families exert on adults is likely to be strongest for those with comparatively weaker ties to religion, the family revolution may impact men, young adults, and mainline Protestants more than other groups.

Drawing upon data from the General Social Survey, this study finds that the deep and enduring ties between religion and family that have characterized much of the nation's history continue up to the present. Men and women who are married with children are 62 percent more likely to attend religious services on a weekly basis, compared with their peers who are unmarried and childless. In addition, 21 percent of the decline in religious attendance in the United States from 1972 to 2008 can be attributed to changes in American family life, especially the decline in the percentage of adults who are married with children.

The study also suggests that family change has particularly influenced recent declines in religious attendance among men, young adults, and mainline Protestants. For instance, changes in patterns of marriage and parenthood account for about 33 percent of the decline in religious attendance among men from 1972 to 2008 but only about 15 percent of the decline among women. Likewise, family change accounts for around 27 percent of the decline in religious attendance among young adults (18–40) over this period but only about 20 percent of the decline among middle-aged adults (41–60).

In sum, this study provides substantial empirical support for the idea that the fortunes of American religion rise and fall, at least in part, with the fortunes of the intact, married family. It also generally confirms the idea that change in the numbers of such families is most likely to impact the religious attendance of groups that have a more marginal relationship to religion. Thus, if the nation's retreat from marriage continues apace, this study suggests that the fortunes of American religion are also likely to fall even more than they have since the 1960s.