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

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Over the course of the last half-century, an unprecedented family revolution swept across the United States. The nation has witnessed dramatic increases in age at first marriage, divorce, nonmarital childbearing, cohabitation, and fatherlessness. For instance, as Figure 1 indicates, the percentage of adult men who were married fell from 69 percent in 1960 to 54 percent in 2008. Likewise, as Figure 2 illustrates, the percentage of children born outside of wedlock rose from five percent in 1960 to 40 percent in 2007. These trends are suggestive of the ways in which the family revolution of the last half-century has undercut marriage as the institution that anchors the adult life course and bundles sex, coresidential unions, childbearing, and childrearing together for adults (Cherlin 2004; Wilcox 2004). Consequently, in recent decades, the institutions of marriage and the family have lost important functions, moral authority, and power to shape the lives of men and women in the U.S.

The shifting fortunes of the family in America present real and obvious challenges to religion in America. Given that American religious institutions have devoted substantial homiletical, pastoral, and educational resources over much of the nation's history to legitimating and supporting conventional family life (Christiano 2000), this family revolution has posed and continues to pose a crisis of legitimacy and institutional survival to many religious traditions in the U.S.—especially more "churchly" traditions such as mainline Protestantism, Roman Catholicism, and Reform Judaism (Stark and Finke 2000; Wilcox 2006). How should churches, synagogues, and mosques respond to the changing contours of family life in America, that is, to the rise of cohabiting couples, stepfamilies, single mothers, gays and lesbians, and so forth?

In the face of this new family moment, many religious scholars have encouraged American religious institutions to accommodate the family revolution of the last half-century. For example,

sociologist Penny Long Marler (1995: 52) thinks that Protestant churches need to retool their messages and ministries to reach adults who are not living in conventional families:

> Unfortunately, the "missing families"—mostly nontraditional—continue to "take their business elsewhere." Clearly, while bowing to the critical contributions of traditional families, past and present, congregations must cast their nets farther and more conscientiously. Otherwise, contemporary white Protestantism may be forever "lost in the fifties." Given the realities of an aging population and a shrinking traditional family base, it is clear that a future mired in the past is really no future at all.

Likewise, sociologist Penny Edgell (2006: 161) argues that mainline Protestant churches can flourish if they offer an "affirmative, religiously based vision of contemporary family life" that honors gender egalitarianism, avoids stigmatizing divorce, and publicly welcomes adults and children living outside intact, married families.

If the longstanding relationship between religion and the family in American life were accidental or artificial, the accommodationist agenda advanced by Edgell and Marler might make sense. To respond to this new family moment, their work suggests, all that religious institutions need to do is to adjust their preaching, teaching, and pastoral life to these new family realities and watch men and women in nontraditional families stream into their local congregations.

In reality, however, there are good theoretical and substantive grounds for concluding that the longstanding relationship between the fortunes of American religion and the intact, married family is not an accident of history than can easily be overcome, but rather an enduring and fundamental feature of American religious life. Religious institutions depend in no small part on the institutions of marriage and family to successfully socialize children into religious institutions and

to orient adults to the moral, social, and spiritual goods offered by these institutions (Christiano 2000; Wilcox 2006). Moreover, the religious push that intact, married families exert on children and adults in America is likely to be strongest for those with comparatively weaker ties to religion—for instance, men, young adults, and mainline Protestants (Wilcox 2006).

I turn now to detailing some of the most important "relationships of dependency and control" linking religion and the family in the United States (Edgell 2003: 164) by focusing on the ties between family demographics and adult religious attendance in the U.S., and by explaining why these ties are more salient for some groups in American life than for others. I focus here on religious attendance because it is a critical marker of the health of American religion (Smith 1998), and because it also predicts a range of positive social outcomes in family life, physical health, and mental health (Ellison and Levin 1998; Mahoney 2009; Wilcox 2006).

As the Family Goes

There are a number of important theoretical and substantive reasons why strong families that combine childbearing with stable, happy marriages are likely to foster higher levels of religiosity, on average, among adults than are alternative living or family arrangements. Parenthood, in particular, is linked to religion for three reasons. First, parenthood is often a "generative" experience that endows life with new meaning for mothers and fathers, thereby encouraging them to look at life with a new appreciation for its moral and spiritual dimensions; this new perspective on life, in turn, can lead men and women to reconsider the religion of their own childhood or to seek out an entirely new religious community (Dollahite 2003; Palkovitz 2002). Second, as children move into their school-age years, parents often will seek out churches, synagogues, and mosques to supply their children with religious and moral education; this effort to integrate their children into a religious community and worldview will often lead parents to start or increase their level of religious

attendance (Ammerman 1997; Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, and Waite 1995). As sociologist Wade Clark Roof (Roof 1993: 157) points out, “The presence of young, school-age children and feelings of parental responsibility for them drives boomers back to church and to enroll their children in religious education classes.”

Third, the largest religious traditions in the U.S.—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam (Kosmin *et al.* 2001)—all provide social, religious, and moral direction and support to parents. That is, parents typically find that local religious congregations have large numbers of parents who are seriously invested in their families, and parents tend to encounter religious messages and rituals—from baptisms to bar mitzvahs—that legitimate their decision to become parents and to invest in their children (Wilcox 2006). More generally, and more fundamentally, religious congregations typically encourage adults to embrace an ascetical ethos of self-sacrifice that has an elective affinity with the self-sacrifice required of parents in relationship to their children (Durkheim 1995). Among other things, this may help explain why fertility and religiosity are highly correlated, as are higher levels of parental attention and affection with religiosity (Hayford and Morgan 2008; Mahoney 2009; Wilcox 1998).

By contrast, men and women who do not have children, or who live apart from their children, can more readily focus on their own needs and desires. Their ability to focus on adult concerns and pursuits, and to more easily embrace a hedonistic way of life, makes the world of religion, and its renunciatory demands to sacrifice time, treasure, and pleasure for the benefit of God and neighbor, more alien and less attractive (Durkheim 1995; Stark and Finke 2000). In short, there is no elective affinity, and there is not likely to be any such affinity in the near future, between being childless and religious in contemporary America.

Marriage is also clearly linked to religiosity in the United States and for at least three reasons. First, religious congregations lend social, religious, and moral support to marriage both by

supporting marriage-related norms, such as sexual fidelity, and by providing couples with access to social networks that are dominated by married couples (Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, and Waite 1995; Wilcox 2004). Accordingly, married men and women often seek out religious institutions to guide and legitimate their married way of life. Second, couples who enjoy the same faith as one another (or where one spouse converts to the other spouse's faith) and a high quality relationship can lend cognitive and social support to one another's faith; this form of religious homogeneity, in turn, tends to foster higher levels of religious belief and practice (Stark and Finke 2000).

Finally, high-quality marriages both depend upon and reinforce virtues such as loyalty, fidelity, and generosity (Stanley 2005; Wilcox and Nock 2006). These virtues also tend to be prized by religious traditions (Smith 2003). Thus, once again, there is an elective affinity between the moral ethos found in religious congregations and that found in a good marriage. These three factors help to explain why there is an empirical association between high-quality, stable marriages and high levels of religious belief and practice (Mahoney 2009; Valler, Ellison, and Powers 2009; Wilcox and Nock 2006).

By contrast, single or cohabiting adults are not as likely to practice the virtues associated with good marriages. Singles do not need to negotiate the compromises, challenges, and sacrifices associated with marriage, and cohabiting partners are less likely to be faithful, generous, and committed to one another, compared to married spouses (Waite and Gallagher 2000). Thus, singles and cohabiting men and women are probably less likely to identify with the virtues and the broader moral ethos found in religious congregations than are married persons.

For all these reasons, then, marriage and parenthood are likely to be associated with higher levels of religious attendance among men and women in the United States. By contrast, and for the reasons articulated above, childless and unmarried adults are probably less likely to invest themselves in their local religious congregations. And at the societal level, the fortunes of American

religion are likely to rise and fall with the fortunes of the intact, married family. Specifically, I predict that the recent retreat from marriage accounts for a substantial share of recent declines in American religious attendance. What, then, is the evidence for the hypothesis that there are strong ties between parenthood, marriage, and religious attendance among men and women in the U.S.?

Figure 3 illustrates the link between family demography and religious attendance among adults (18-60) in the United States. Using data drawn from the General Social Survey (GSS), Figure 3 indicates that, compared to adults with no children, unmarried parents are 23 percent less likely to attend church on a weekly basis.[1] Evidently, the non-normative character of divorce and non-marital childbearing appear to drive unmarried parents away from church. By contrast, married men and women who do not have children are 14 percent more likely to attend church, compared to childless, unmarried adults. And men and women who are married with children are 62 percent more likely to attend church than their peers who are unmarried and childless. Clearly, adults who combine marriage and parenthood in a conventional manner are most likely to attend religious services.

Moreover, shifts in family structure have played an important role in recent declines in religious attendance among American adults (18-60). For instance, Figure 4 indicates that weekly religious attendance fell by nearly one fifth from the 1970s to the present, from 34 percent in the 1970s to 28 percent in the 2000s among adults aged 18-60. My analysis of the GSS indicates that 21 percent of this decline in religious attendance from 1972 to 2008 is linked to the demographic changes of the last half-century. This means that approximately 5.1 million more adults would be attending churches, synagogues, or mosques on a weekly basis if the United States enjoyed the level of marriage and parenthood that it did in the 1970s (and millions more would be attending 1-3 times a month). Overall, then, these analyses indicate that the fortunes of American religion are closely

[1] Note: Weekly attendance is defined as attending nearly every week or more than that. Unmarried is defined in this study as being either divorced or never married.

connected to the fortunes of families that are married with children, and that one reason America's religious fortunes have waned in recent years is that fewer American adults are married with children.

Variations at the Margin: How the Family-Religion Nexis is Conditioned by Gender, Age, & Religious Tradition

The theoretical links between strong families and religion articulated above should be applicable to virtually every sector of American society. Still, the association between family and religion may be particularly powerful for specific sectors of society. In particular, groups that have a more marginal connection to religion are likely to be especially dependent on strong families to foster higher levels of religiosity in their midst (Wilcox 2006). That is, groups that have lower levels of intrinsic spirituality, morbidity and mortality, and religious capital may be especially likely to depend upon strong families to be integrated into religious communities. This is because intrinsic spirituality, the threat of disease or death, and high levels of religious capital acquired in one's childhood are all associated with higher levels of religious belief and practice (Stark and Finke 2000). More specifically, men, young adults, and members of more churchly traditions, such as mainline Protestantism, are likely to be especially dependent on marriage and parenthood to draw them into the pews on any given weekend.

Throughout much of the world, including the United States, men tend to be less religious than women (Miller and Stark 2002; Stark 2002). This seems in part to be a consequence of the fact that men have lower levels of intrinsic spirituality, that is, they appear less likely to have spiritual feelings, aspirations, and a sense of relatedness to the supernatural than do women (Stark 2002; Sullins 2006). Accordingly, they are more likely to depend on the tug of family life to orient them towards religious belief and especially practice (Wilcox 2006).

Moreover, because men tend to depend much more on marriage to maintain an ongoing relationship with their children (Townsend 2002), they very fact of being a parent is not enough to orient men to religious practice. They have to be married fathers to experience the full boost in religious practice associated with fatherhood (Eggebeen and Knoester 2001).

To investigate this hypothesis, I turn again to data from the GSS. Figure 5 suggests that men are significantly more likely to be affected by their family status when it comes to religious attendance than are women. Specifically, unmarried men with children are 38 percent less likely to attend church on a weekly basis compared to unmarried men without children, whereas unmarried women with children are only 21 percent less likely to attend weekly compared to their unmarried, childless peers. Similarly, married men without children are 30 percent more likely to attend church weekly, compared to their unmarried, childless peers; by contrast, married women without children are no more likely to attend church weekly than their unmarried, childless peers. Finally, married men with children are 80 percent more likely to attend church weekly, compared to unmarried, childless men, whereas married women with children are only 48 percent more likely to attend church weekly compared to their unmarried, childless peers. Thus, the link between religious attendance and family structure is clearly stronger for men than it is for women, and being married with children gives men the largest boost in religious attendance.

Not surprisingly, recent family changes have also played a more important role in declines in men's religious attendance than they have in declines in women's attendance. As Figure 6 indicates, weekly religious attendance fell from 29 percent in the 1970s to 23 percent among men; over this same period, it fell from 40 to 32 percent among women. The falling fortunes of the conventional family account for about 33 percent of the decline in men's religious attendance, and about 15 percent of the decline in women's religious attendance. Clearly, marriage, fatherhood, and church attendance are a package deal for many men (Townsend 2002), and as the familial

dimension of this package has begun to unravel over the last half century so too has the religious dimension of this package.

Young adults in the United States are the least religious age group in the country. This is partly because they are in a transitional stage of life where little in their lives is institutionalized and much is in flux (Smith and Snell 2009; Wuthnow 2007). This is also because they are less likely to face the challenges of ill health or imminent mortality that make many adults turn towards religious participation as they age (Ellison and Levin 1998; Koenig, McCullough, and Larson 2002). Thus, because most social and cultural forces push them away from religious practice, marriage and parenthood are likely to be two social forces that play a particularly important role in fostering higher levels of religious attendance among young adults (Wuthnow 2007). This could be especially important because the family revolution of the last half-century has been associated with marked increases in age at first marriage and declines in fertility and marriage among young adults aged 18 to 30 (Wuthnow 2007). For instance, the percentage of twentysomethings who are married fell from 60 to 30 percent from 1970 to 2000 (Wuthnow 2007: 24). By contrast, the percentage of adults aged 40-60 who are married with children has not declined as dramatically.

Accordingly, I hypothesize that family structure is a particularly important predictor of religious attendance among young adults (18-40), and that changes in American family life have played a more important role in declining levels of religious attendance for young adults (18-40) than for middle-aged adults (41-60). Figure 7 does not confirm my hypothesis. Demography matters about as much for middle-aged adult weekly attendance as it does for young adult attendance. Specifically, compared to unmarried young adults with no children, unmarried young adults with children are 23 percent less likely to attend weekly; similarly, unmarried middle-aged adults with children are 20 percent less likely to attend weekly compared to their unmarried peers without children. Figure 7 also indicates that married young adults without children are somewhat

more likely to attend weekly than their unmarried, childless peers, whereas middle-aged adults who are married without children do not attend more than their unmarried childless peers. Finally, both young adults and middle-aged adults who are married with children are about two-thirds more likely to attend weekly, compared to their peers who are unmarried without children. Thus, contrary to my expectations, Figure 7 shows that family structure is about as important in predicting the religious attendance of middle-aged adults as it is young adults.

Nevertheless, it is true that demographic changes over the last half century have been more important for young adult attendance than they have been for middle-aged attendance. Figure 8 shows that weekly religious attendance declined by about one-fifth for both young adults and middle-aged adults from the 1970s to the 2000s. My analyses indicate that family change accounts for 27 percent of the decline in religious attendance among young adults and only 20 percent of the decline among middle-aged adults over this period. Family change proved more important for young adults than their middle-aged peers because the retreat from marriage and childbearing has been concentrated among young adults, as noted above. Indeed, my analyses suggest that the dramatic retreat from marriage among young adults appears to have been one of the most important factors driving down religious attendance among this sector of the population over the last half century (Wuthnow 2007).

If we categorize religious traditions on a continuum from churchly traditions that take a more accommodating stance towards society, are less likely to emphasize a strong supernatural orientation, and enjoy weaker communities to sectarian traditions that take a more countercultural stance towards society, stress a strong supernatural orientation, and enjoy high levels of internal solidarity (Stark and Finke 2000), we can assume that members of more churchly traditions depend more upon strong families to engage in their religious communities than do sectarian traditions. This is because the sectarian traditions are able to offer a range of spiritual and social goods to

members to draw them into regular religious attendance (Smith 1998; Stark and Finke 2000). By contrast, churchly traditions depend more on family-related factors like marriage and parenthood to draw their adherents into regular religious attendance (Wilcox 2002; Wilcox 2006).

Accordingly, I hypothesize that parenthood and marriage are more predictive of religious attendance among a churchly tradition, mainline Protestantism, than a sectarian tradition, evangelical Protestantism. Moreover, I also hypothesize that family change accounts for a larger share of any decline in religious attendance among mainline Protestantism than among evangelical Protestantism.

Table 9 provides some support for my hypothesis. Clearly, the only family structure that is linked to a marked increase in weekly religious attendance for mainline Protestants is being married with children. By contrast, being married with children is somewhat less important for evangelical Protestants, but being divorced or never-married with children is associated with comparatively lower attendance—perhaps because evangelical churches are more likely to stigmatize divorce and nonmarital childbearing than are mainline Protestant churches (Wilcox 2004). Still, it is worth noting that unmarried evangelical parents attend at markedly higher rates (34 percent in the 2000s) than do unmarried mainline parents (16 percent in the 2000s). This contrast is indicative of the ways in which evangelical Protestantism is more vital than mainline Protestantism (Smith 1998).

Figure 10 provides more evidence of the comparative institutional strength of evangelical Protestantism. The percentage of mainline Protestant adults aged 18-60 attending church weekly fell from 28 percent in the 1970s to 22 percent in the 2000s. My analyses indicate that shifts in family life account for 16 percent of this decline in attendance among mainline Protestants. By contrast, weekly attendance increased for evangelical Protestants even amidst the retreat from marriage, from 43 percent in the 1970s to 47 percent in the 2000s. Elsewhere, I argue that evangelical Protestantism was able to capitalize on concerns about family decline to attract converts and to reinforce a sense

of countercultural identity among many of its own adherents (Wilcox 2004). Thus, the family revolution of the last half century has reinforced the decline of mainline Protestantism and has, in some ways, paradoxically strengthened the institutional fortunes of evangelical Protestantism.

Conclusion

In the face of the family revolution of the last half-century, a number of scholars have argued that American religious traditions, especially mainline Protestantism, should accept our new family moment and embrace a range of nontraditional families and living arrangements, from single adults to step-families to gays and lesbians to cohabiting couples (Edgell 2006; Marler 1995). The normative value of this accommodationist strategy is beyond the scope of this paper.

However, from a sociological perspective, this agenda seems quixotic. This paper provides both theoretical and substantive reasons to explain why adults living in nontraditional families or households are much less likely to darken the door of a church, synagogue, or mosque on any given weekend. This study specifically finds that adults who are not married without children are significantly less likely to attend church than their peers who are married with children.

Moreover, efforts to dramatically reorient the teaching, preaching and pastoral practice of mainline Protestant churches so as to be open and affirming of family diversity have not reversed the institutional decline of these churches. For instance, the United Churches of Christ had to abandon a high profile campaign—the "God is Still Speaking" campaign—aimed at nontraditional families and single adults in part because it was losing members and money throughout the campaign (Wilcox 2007). This should come as no surprise, given that this paper has shown that mainline Protestant adults who are unmarried or childless are significantly less likely to attend church than their peers who are married with children.

But this study also provides cold comfort to proponents of traditional religion and traditional families. It is true that more sectarian traditions, such as evangelical Protestantism and Mormonism, have been able to survive and even thrive in the wake of the family revolution, partly by reacting strong against the family revolution of the last half century. But more churchly traditions—from Roman Catholicism to Reform Judaism—have been hit hard by the family changes of recent years (Wilcox 2006). More generally, 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. Thus, if the nation's retreat from marriage continues apace (Wilcox 2009), this study suggests that the fortunes of American religion are also destined to fall further than they already have.

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