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Is Religion an Answer?
Marriage, Fatherhood, and the Male Problematic

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ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT CONSEQUENCES of the family revolution of the last half-century—a revolution marked by dramatic increases in divorce, nonmarital childbearing, and cohabitation—is that ever larger numbers of men are becoming disconnected from family life. From New York to New Orleans, from San Francisco to Seattle, more and more men in the United States are living apart from the children they helped to bring into this world. This growing disconnect between men and families has been aptly called the "male problematic" by University of Chicago theologian Don Browning.

What is Browning getting at? Drawing upon work done in evolutionary psychology, Browning observes that, biologically speaking, fathers have a fairly weak tie to their children, especially in comparison to mothers. From the start, pregnancy, lactation, and the hormone oxytocin typically bind mothers to their children in ways that fathers do not experience. Partly as a consequence, fathers around the world are more likely to live apart from their children and to invest less in their children than mothers. Most societies have sought to strengthen men's connection to the family by championing the marital vow and by providing men with a unique role in the family. But a variety of factors have conspired in the modern world to distance men from family life: the breakdown of marriage, declining real wages for men, the sexual revolution, and the rise of expressive individualism. In Browning's words, modernity threatens "to loosen further the already archaic and fragile tie of males to offspring and their offspring's mothers."[1]

How is the male problematic visible in contemporary American life? At the level of family structure, a growing number of mothers and children live in households without residential fathers; likewise a growing number of fathers live apart from households with children and therefore spend little if any time on child rearing and family-related housework. The percentage of children living in father-absent homes rose from 11 percent in 1960 to 27 percent in 2000.[2] In addition, over the course of their lives, more than half of all children will live apart from their fathers—either because of divorce or nonmarital childbearing. One study found that approximately 60 percent of children in fatherless families saw their fathers once a month or less.[3]

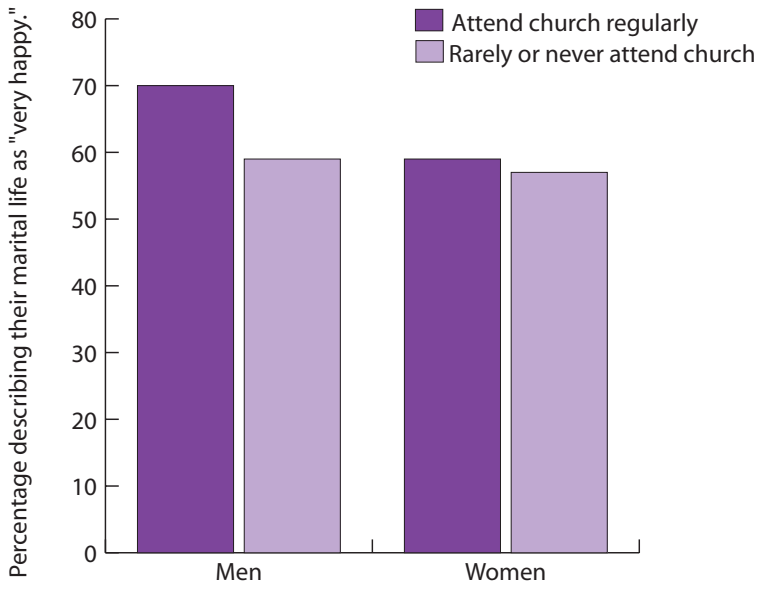
Increases in cohabitation are no remedy to the male problematic. Men living in cohabiting unions are unlikely to stick around and develop abiding ties to their children, because cohabiting unions are much less likely than marriages to endure. One study found that a child born to a cohabiting couple had a 50 percent risk that her parents would part in her first five years of life; by contrast, a child born to a married couple had only a 15 percent risk that her parents would part in her first five years.[4]

Scholars, policymakers, and civic and religious leaders concerned about the rise of the male problematic in modern America have speculated that religion in the United States may offer at least a partial answer to the male problematic. Browning has argued that one of the historic achievements of Judaism and Christianity is that they succeeded to an important degree in integrating men into families and the lives of their wives and children. This leaves us with an empirical question: Is there any evidence that religion is playing a role in encouraging a strong family orientation among contemporary American men? More specifically, how are religious tradition and attendance linked to marital quality and stability, nonmarital childbearing, and paternal involvement and affection—all key indicators that tap the degree to which men are investing in their families? To answer these questions, I analyzed data taken from three nationally representative surveys: the General Social Survey (GSS), the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), and the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG).

Faith and Marriage

Notwithstanding recent reports to the contrary,[5] religious Americans enjoy happier and more stable marriages than their peers who are secular or only nominally affiliated with a religious tradition. My analysis of the GSS (2000–2006) indicates that both married men and women aged 18 to 55 who attend religious services regularly (several times a month or more) have happier marriages—though the influence of churchgoing appears to be markedly stronger for married men (see figure 1). For men, 70 percent of husbands who attend church regularly report they are "very happy" in their marriages, compared to 59 percent of husbands who rarely or never attend church. For women, 59 percent of wives who attend church regularly report they are "very happy" in their marriages, compared to 57 percent of wives who rarely or never attend church. One reason that the effect of churchgoing seems weaker for wives is that they are more likely to attend church without their husbands; such solo attendance does not appear to benefit women's marriages. My analysis of the 1992–1994 wave of the NSFH indicates that churchgoing was only associated with marital happiness for women when they attended church with their husbands. In addition, a study of urban relationships found that men's religious attendance was a better predictor of women's relationship satisfaction than women's own religious

Figure 1. Marital Happiness, by Sex and Church Attendance



Source: General Social Survey (2000-2006).

attendance.[6] Taken together, this research suggests that not only do churchgoing husbands enjoy happier marriages but also that their wives are more likely to experience marital happiness, compared to married couples where husbands do not attend religious services on a regular basis.

The GSS (2000–2006) also indicates that religiously affiliated Americans aged 18 to 55 who attend church once a month or more are typically happier in their marriages than their unaffiliated peers. Among married whites, 70 percent of churchgoing Mainline Protestants, 69 percent of churchgoing evangelical Protestants, and 60 percent of churchgoing Catholics are "very happy" in their marriages, compared to 60 percent of their peers who rarely or never attend church. Among married African Americans, 58 percent of churchgoing black Protestants are "very happy" in their marriages, compared to 46 percent of blacks who rarely or never attend church. Among married Latinos, 50 percent of churchgoing Catholics and 52 percent of churchgoing Protestants are "very happy," compared to 47 percent of Latinos who rarely or never attend church. (Note: I do not report figures for other religious traditions here because there were insufficient numbers of them in the GSS to generate reliable statistics.) Thus, for most married Americans, an active religious affiliation is linked to higher levels of marital happiness.

Partly as a consequence of the link between religion and marital quality, religion is also linked to lower levels of divorce in the United States. For instance, Americans who attend religious services are less likely to divorce than Americans who do not. Specifically, data from the NSFH indicate that men and women who attended religious services regularly (several times a month or more) were approximately 35 percent less likely to divorce between 1988 and 1993, compared to their married peers who rarely or never attended religious services. Catholics, Mainline Protestants, and Jews who attended services regularly were especially likely to avoid divorce, compared to churchgoing evangelical Protestants and black Protestants. These differences in divorce rates by religious tradition are in part attributable to socioeconomic differences between these traditions; that is, evangelical Protestants and black Protestants face somewhat higher divorce rates because they are more likely to hail from working-class and poor communities where economic struggles often stress marriages. In all probability, low Catholic divorce rates are linked to Catholic teaching about the importance of marital permanence.

My analysis indicates that the religious attendance of wives and especially husbands is associated with happier and more stable marriages in the U.S.; note that the link between religion and strong marriages is particularly powerful for couples who attend church together. This finding is important because men, women, and children who are fortunate enough to live in families centered around high-quality, stable marriages enjoy a range of benefits: better health, greater wealth, and more happiness than their peers.[7] Thus, insofar as this brief finds that religion binds husbands to their wives in stronger marriages in the United States, it also suggests that religion indirectly fosters the physical, economic, and emotional well-being of adults and children.

Faith and Nonmarital Childbearing

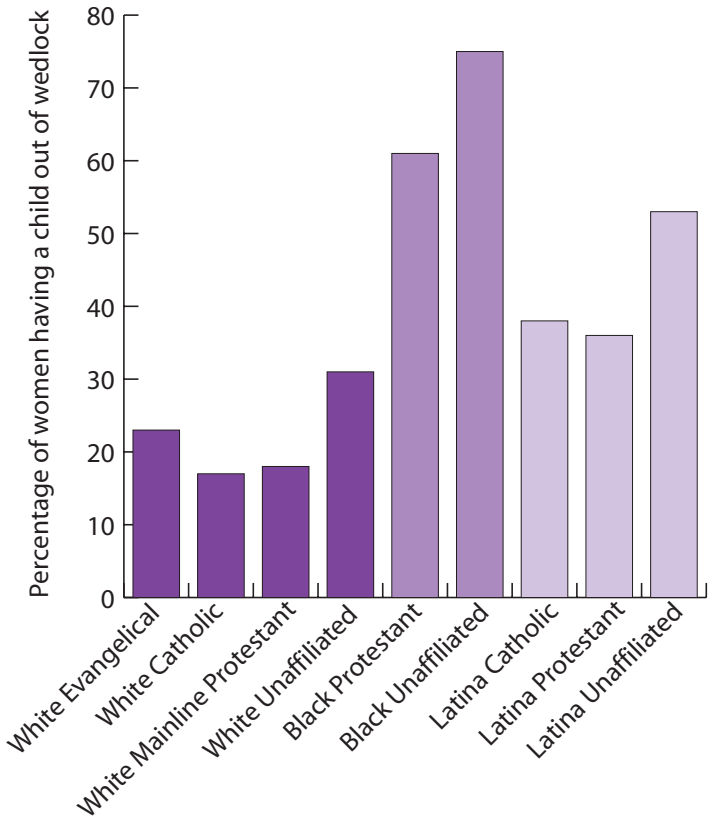
More than one in three children are now born outside of marriage: In 2006, 38.5 percent of all babies were born outside of wedlock.[8] This increase in nonmarital childbearing does not bode well for men's involvement in the lives of their families and children. Men who father children outside of wedlock, including men who cohabit with the mothers of their children, are much less likely than married

fathers to develop involved, affectionate, and consistent relationships with their children, in large part because their relationships with the mothers of their children are more unstable than are marital relationships. So, does religion reduce the likelihood that children will be born outside of marriage?

Data taken from the 2002 NSFG indicate that religious attendance is linked to markedly lower levels of nonmarital childbearing. Specifically, 34 percent of mothers who attended church monthly or less had a child outside of wedlock, compared to only 25 percent of mothers who attended church at least once a week. After controlling for sociodemographic factors, statistical models indicate that mothers who attend church weekly or more are about half as likely to have a child outside of wedlock, compared to mothers who attend church less often or never.

Figure 2 shows marked differences in nonmarital childbearing by religious tradition, race, and ethnicity. Specifically, the NSFG data indicate that, among white mothers, 24 percent of evangelical Protestants, 17 percent of Catholics, and 18 percent of Mainline Protestants had a child outside of wedlock, compared to 32 percent of unaffiliated mothers. Among African American mothers, 62 percent of black Protestants had a child outside of wedlock, compared to 75 percent of unaffiliated mothers. Among Latina mothers, 38 percent of Catholics and 36 percent of Protestants had a birth outside of wedlock, compared to 55 percent of unaffiliated mothers. (Note: I was not able to analyze childbearing patterns among women from other religious traditions, such as Judaism or Mormonism, because there were not enough of them in the data to conduct statistically reliable analyses.) Thus, the NSFG indicates that women who are affiliated with a religious tradition are also less likely to have a child outside of wedlock.

Figure 2. Out-of-Wedlock Childbearing, by Religious Affiliation



Source: National Survey of Family Growth (2002).

This brief indicates that women who are religious, as measured both by religious attendance and affiliation, are less likely to bear a child outside of wedlock. Given that a recent study of urban childbearing found that paternal attendance is an even better predictor of nonmarital childbearing than is maternal attendance,[9] it may well be that men's attendance throughout the nation is also more predictive of marital childbearing than is women's attendance. (The

NSFG data did not allow me to examine the effect of men's attendance on women's childbearing.) In any case, the findings on childbearing in this brief suggest that men and women who attend church regularly are more likely to put marriage before the baby carriage, compared to other parents. In so doing, they are increasing the likelihood that their children will enjoy an involved, affectionate, and consistent relationship with their father.

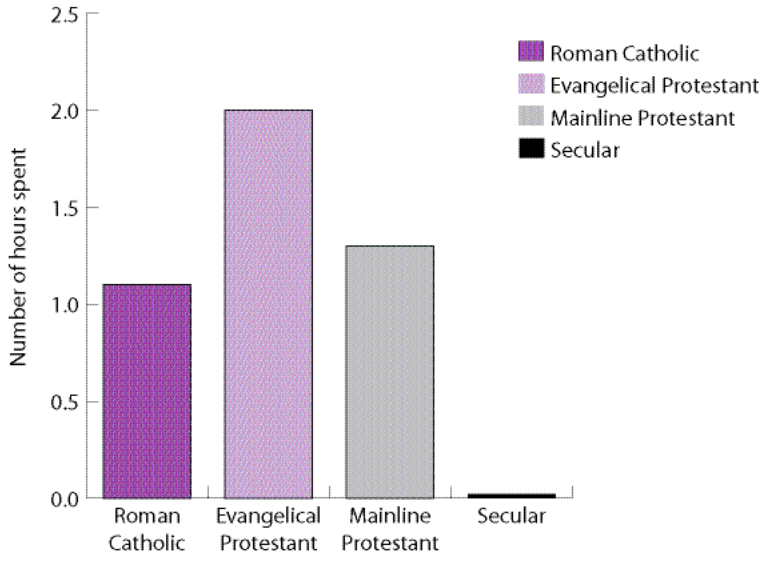
Faith and Fatherhood

Clearly, religion increases the odds that fathers will get and stay happily married to the mothers of their children. But does religion also directly foster higher levels of involvement and affection with children for men who reside with their children? In a word, yes.

In my book, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands,* I find that religious fathers who reside with their children are more involved and affectionate than their more secular peers. For instance, compared to dads who say they have no religious affiliation, fathers who attend church regularly (several times a month or more) devote at least two hours a week more in youth-related activities, such as helping in Boy Scouts, coaching soccer, and leading a church youth group. Fathers who are regular churchgoers also report that they are significantly more likely to engage in one-on-one activities with their school-age children, such as helping with homework, reading to them, or playing a game, compared to fathers who do not attend religious services regularly. They are also at least 65 percent more likely to report praising and hugging their children "very often," compared to unaffiliated fathers.

Similar patterns arise when it comes to religious tradition. Fathers who are affiliated with a religious tradition are typically more involved and affectionate with their children, compared to dads with no religious affiliation. For instance, as figure 3 illustrates, Catholic dads spend 1.1 hours, evangelical Protestant dads spend 2 hours, and Mainline Protestant dads spend 1.3 hours more in youth-related activities than unaffiliated dads. Catholic and evangelical Protestant fathers are more likely to report engaging in one-on-one activities like reading to their children, compared to unaffiliated fathers. Likewise, Catholic

Figure 3. Fathers' Involvement in Youth Activities, by Religious Affiliation



Source: Data calculated from W. Bradford Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands*, 2004.

fathers are 50 percent, evangelical Protestant fathers are 65 percent, and Mainline Protestant fathers are 40 percent more likely to report praising and hugging their children "very often," compared to unaffiliated fathers.[10]

Thus, the findings reported in this brief also suggest that religion fosters an intensive and affectionate style of parenting among U.S. fathers who live with their children; fathers who attend church regularly are also more likely to devote time, attention, and affection to their children, compared to fathers who are not integrated into a religious community. In other words, religious fathers come closer to approximating the "new father" ideals of involvement and affection than do more secular fathers, or fathers who are nominally religious.

Conclusion

This brief provides an array of evidence indicating that religion is an answer to the male problematic—that is, the tendency of fathers to become detached, emotionally or physically, from their children and the mothers of their children. I find that fathers who are religious, and who have partners who are religious, are—on average—more likely to be happily married, to be engaged and affectionate parents, and to get and stay married to the mothers of their children. As a consequence, religious fathers and husbands are much less likely to fall prey to the male problematic of late modernity.

What accounts for the family-oriented effects of religion on family men? First, the rituals and preaching men encounter in religious institutions—from baptisms to Father's Day sermons—underline the moral responsibilities that bind them to their wives and children, endowing them with a sacred character. In the last twenty years, churches—particularly evangelical Protestant churches—have focused more of their family rhetoric on men in an effort to encourage them to take a more active role in the lives of family members.[11] Second, religious congregations also provide men with multiple opportunities—from worship to youth groups—to spend time with their wives and children. This time often allows men a chance to get to know their family members better and to signal how much they care about them.

Third, the social networks in churches tend to be family centered, and these networks offer informal and formal support for norms that sustain marriage and family life. For instance, fathers experiencing difficulty in disciplining a toddler can turn to their religious networks in search of advice and encouragement, thereby becoming a more effective parent. Similarly, studies suggest that churchgoing encourages sexual fidelity, in part because church-based social networks monitor the behavior of their members.[12] Finally, by imposing a meaningful order on the normal challenges of family life—not to mention unusual traumas, such as unemployment, illness, and death—religious faith can help family men deal constructively with the ordinary and extraordinary stresses in their lives. This is important because stress often undercuts men's abilities to be active and affectionate husbands and fathers.

Although religion plays an important role in fostering a strong family orientation among men, it is by no means a silver bullet when it comes to addressing the challenges of the contemporary male problematic. Obviously, the figures reported here indicate that divorce, nonmarital childbearing, and neglectful fathers can be found in the midst of virtually every U.S. religious congregation. In addition, this brief indicates that churches serving African Americans and Latinos are especially

vulnerable to the male problematic. These communities have been particularly hard hit by the cultural and economic changes of the last half-century—e.g., the sexual revolution, deindustrialization, etc.—that have fueled men's separation from family life. As a consequence, these communities have higher rates of nonmarital childbearing, which puts these fathers at risk of becoming distant from the children they helped to bring into the world. Accordingly, any effort to respond to the male problematic must extend beyond religion to address the cultural and economic forces drawing men away from the family, forces that have been particularly consequential for African American and Latino men.

Nevertheless, this brief indicates that religion is achieving an important measure of success in overcoming the male problematic in late modernity by turning the hearts and minds of contemporary men towards the needs of their families. Judging by the results reported in this brief, religious men (and their wives) enjoy happier marriages, they are less likely to father a child outside of wedlock, and they are more likely to take an active and affectionate approach to child rearing, compared to secular or nominally religious men. Therefore, any effort to strengthen men's ties to their children and families must acknowledge and incorporate the important role that religious institutions play in directing men's hearts toward home.

Endnotes

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2. U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, P20-537. Tables CH1-CH4 (Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau, 2001).
3. Judith Seltzer and Suzanne Bianchi, "Children's Contact with Absent Parents," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 50 (1998): 663–678.
4. Wendy D. Manning, Pamela J. Smock, and Debarun Majumdar, "The Relative Stability of Cohabiting and Marital Unions for Children," *Population Research and Policy Review* 23 (2004): 135–159.
5. A number of media outlets and public commentators have picked up on George Barna's 2004 research showing that "born-again" Christians are about as likely to have divorced as Americans without a born-again experience. But this research does not distinguish between nominal and churchgoing Christians, as this brief does. See, for instance, Ron Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005).
6. Nicholas H. Wolfinger and W. Bradford Wilcox, "Happily Ever After? Religion, Marital Status, Gender and Relationship Quality in Urban Families," *Social Forces* 86 (2008): 1311–1337.
7. W. Bradford Wilcox et al., *Why Marriage Matters, 2nd edition: 26 Conclusions from the Social Sciences* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2005).
8. National Center for Health Statistics, *National Vital Statistics Reports* 56, no. 7 (Dec. 5, 2007): 4.
9. W. Bradford Wilcox and Nicholas H. Wolfinger, "Then Comes Marriage? Religion, Race, and Marriage in Urban America," *Social Science Research* 36 (2007): 569–589.
10. The figures reported in this section of the brief are drawn from W. Bradford Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 224–231.
11. Ibid., 21–73.
12. Judith Treas and Deirdre Giesen, "Sexual Infidelity among Married and Cohabiting Americans," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62 (2000): 48–60.

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