

A SUTHERLAND INSTITUTE
POLICY PUBLICATION

Religious Contributions to the Family

Social Benefits of Religion, Volume 5

Written by William C. Duncan
and Dallyn Edmunds

September 2025





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Publication Introduction

The previous publications of this series have examined links between religion and social services, human rights, education, and mental health. Each has focused on the social contributions of religious institutions and people of faith in each of these fields. In a climate of decreasing religious affiliation in many communities, more Americans may find it difficult to understand why our constitution prioritizes religious freedom. Why does religious exercise deserve specific protection? Why are protections of free speech and the like not sufficient?

Historical context is helpful. Religion played a central role in society at the time of the Framing of the Constitution reflected in this passage from George Washington's 1796 address to the American people:

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens. The mere politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths, which are the instruments of investigation in courts of

justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.¹

President Washington's claim might seem surprising: it would be hard to capture all the social and individual benefits of religion. It promotes the honesty necessary to a functioning legal system. It promotes a goodness in citizens that cannot be produced by education, as important as that is.

The inclusion of religious freedom in the Bill of Rights reflects the Framers' understanding that certain traits and aspirations of citizens are essential for a free society but cannot be created by the government. External "supports," like religion, are necessary. It makes sense to ensure that this support can operate freely and play its vital role.

Much more can be said about this, but it is noteworthy that modern social science confirms Washington's observation on the social benefits of religion.

This report describes only a sample of the relevant evidence on the connection between religion and strong family relationships. The evidence about the connection is particularly strong.

Religion and Marriage

Three ways religion helps marriage:

1. Increases the chances that people get married
2. Elevates marriage as a conscious goal/priority of dating
3. Creates marriages that avoid the instability of cohabitation

World religions promote “marriage as a vital and valuable institution and practice that lies at the heart of the family and at the foundation of broader society.”² That teaching has become somewhat countercultural as “[m]arriage rates continue to decline, with every succeeding generation seeing lower marriage rates than the previous one.”

By contrast, “[m]ore adults today between the ages of 18 and 44 have ever cohabited than have ever been married.”³ Cohabitation, though, is not a substitute for marriage. It is far less likely to be permanent⁴ and is characterized by lower levels of commitment, relationship satisfaction, and relationship stability.⁵



An important longitudinal study demonstrates that attending religious services is a “strong[] predictor of marriage.” As the world experienced a “retreat from marriage” in the 2010s, the difference in commitment to marriage between those with “low” and “high religiosity” became more marked. The study notes that in the 2010-2014 cohort “41% reporting low religiosity versus 57% reporting high religiosity were married.”⁶

Religious individuals were much more likely to have dated in young adulthood with marriage in mind and were more likely to prioritize getting married over other life goals.

In the United States, a study divided study participants into three groups “based on religious attendance, intensity, attitudes, spirituality, and beliefs.” The researchers “found statistically significant relationships between stronger religiosity and greater likelihood of marriage[,] and between marriage and stronger religiosity in the transition from emerging to established adulthood.”⁷ Looking at data from 2022, religion scholar Ryan Burge found “more frequent [church]

attenders are more likely to be married[,] and to marry younger than those who report going to services less than once a year.”⁸

This may be because religious individuals “approached dating and marriage differently than others in their cohort. For example, religious individuals were much more likely to have dated in young adulthood with marriage in mind and were more likely to prioritize getting married over other life goals.”⁹

Additionally, religion appears to influence decisions about cohabitation. A study that examined the religious upbringing of women found that:

Not only does religion reduce the odds that young adults cohabit, it also increases the odds that they marry directly, or without cohabiting first. . . . In other words, religiosity is associated with vastly greater likelihood of going directly from singleness to a married union, and generally at younger ages.¹⁰

Religious affiliation, in itself, does not seem to explain this result. More salient is participation: “Within all religious groups, youth who are high in attendance and importance of religion cohabit less than those who are low in both factors.”¹¹

Religion and Childbearing

Three ways religion promotes childbearing:

1. Religious people want more children
2. They have more children
3. They are also more likely to adopt

Similarly, the attitudes of religious people around having children are different.

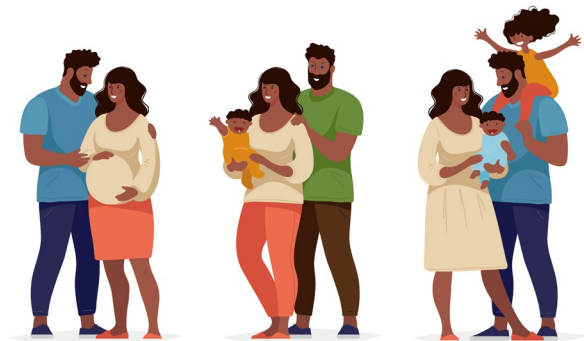
Like marriage rates, rates of fertility are declining. Jesús Fernández-Villaverde, a University of Pennsylvania economist, calls “rapid fertility decline” an “existential crisis.” The global “total fertility rate is likely already below replacement ... approximately 2.18 children per woman.” Fertility decline leads to economic contraction, which in turn, has implications for much else since “total output growth is crucial for addressing the funding of Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, servicing our public debt, and financing our armed forces in the face of increasing international competition.”¹²

As with the societal changes to marriage, religion seems to be somewhat more resistant to fertility decline.

A global study found:

Whether we measure religion by religious affiliation, religiosity (frequency of service attendance), personal piety (frequency of prayer), or religious salience (importance of God and importance of religion), people of faith have more children, even in contemporary low fertility societies.¹³

The authors noted that “data from low-fertility countries in the Americas, East Asia, and Europe show that religion’s positive influence on fertility has become stronger in recent decades.” Specifically, “people ages 18-49 who attend religious services regularly have 0.27 more children than those who never, or practically never, attend.”¹⁴



Findings from the United States are similar. The Pew Religious Landscape Study found that “Christians have a higher completed fertility rate (2.2 children per respondent) than religiously unaffiliated Americans (1.8).”¹⁵

This religious impact on fertility is of long standing. Demographer Lyman Stone looked at fertility data from 1982 to 2020, comparing the nonreligious, less than weekly church attenders,

and weekly attenders. During this period, he explained:

Fertility rates among weekly-attending Americans have never dropped much below 2 children per woman, and as recently as 2008 were around 2.4 children per woman. Fertility among religious people did decline after the 2008 recession, but by 2017 to 2019, it was once again rising. In other words, there was no long slump in births to the most devout parents. Religious women who attend church less than weekly had lower fertility in all periods, but especially during the 2000s. And perhaps most strikingly, since 2016, fertility rates for weekly- and less-than-weekly-attending women have moved in opposite directions, with fertility falling among the more nominally religious.¹⁶

Religion influences not only fertility rates but also intentions. Looking at the 2002 National Survey

of Family Growth, researchers demonstrated “that women who report that religion is ‘very important’ in their everyday life have both higher fertility and higher intended fertility than those saying religion is ‘somewhat important’ or ‘not important.’”¹⁷

Again, it is worth stressing that attendance, not affiliation, is what seems to matter most.¹⁸

In connection with the prior section, marriage is a particularly strong influence on fertility. “[T]he married have more children than the unmarried.” This provides another way in which religion can impact fertility. Since “religious men and women are more likely to marry compared to their more secular peers,” religiosity promotes fertility through its influence on marriage.¹⁹

Finally, women who “considered religion very important” were more likely to have sought to adopt.²⁰

Religion and Marital Quality

Four ways religion helps marital quality:

1. Prepares couples for successful marriage
2. Promotes husbands and wives sharing household tasks
3. Connected to happier relationships
4. Leads to less infidelity

Of course, the number of marriages is important, but not as important as the quality of those marriages. Here too, religion plays a role.

That role begins prior to marriage: preparing individuals for success when they do marry. For instance, for adolescents, “at least weekly service attendance was subsequently associated with” a number of positive outcomes, including lower probability of “early sexual initiation.”²¹ This is significant because “sexual restraint [is] associated with better relationship outcomes, even when controlling for education, the number of sexual partners, religiosity, and relationship length.” Conversely, studies have found that “premarital sexuality was often a risk factor for later marital instability.”²²

Similarly, as noted above, religious people are more likely than others to avoid premarital cohabitation. This is significant because research suggests that couples who cohabited before engagement:

Had more negative interactions, lower interpersonal commitment, lower relationship quality, and lower relationship confidence

than those who did not cohabit until after engagement or marriage, even after controlling for selection factors and duration of cohabitation.²³

A replication of this study found that the pre-engagement cohabitor group “reported lower marital satisfaction, dedication, and confidence as well as more negative communication.”²⁴

Religiosity also influences the marital experience of spouses.

Given the traditional imbalance between husbands and wives in doing housework, it is encouraging that some research suggests that “men who attended religious services weekly did significantly more housework than either the never-attenders or those in the middle.”²⁵ This study involved men in 34 countries. The researchers admitted:

Contrary to expectations, we find increased religious participation at the individual and cultural zone levels associated with greater participation in some housework tasks and time spent on housework, though the findings

show great variation by task and religious tradition.²⁶

This is consistent with research that shows religious men are very involved in providing childcare.²⁷ Women “in highly religious relationships” are more likely to report “joint decision-making” than “their peers in less/mixed religious couples.”²⁸

An important global study found that:

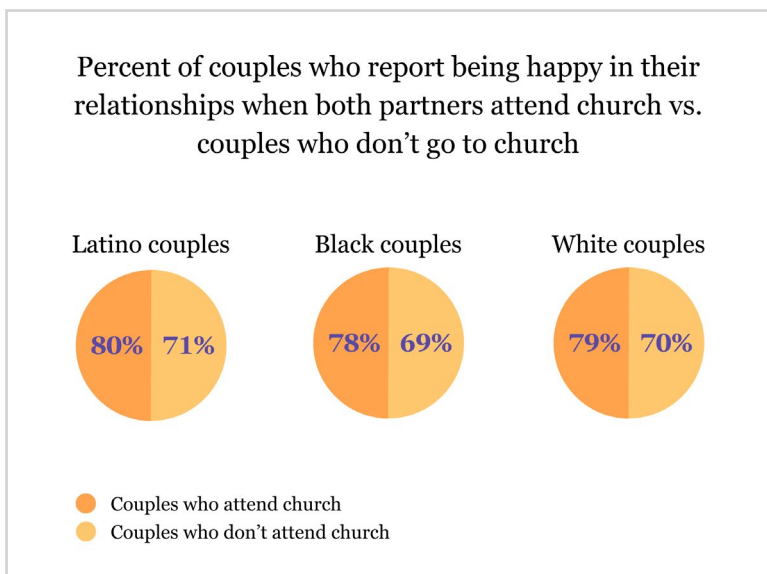
Highly religious couples enjoy higher-quality relationships and more sexual satisfaction, compared to less/mixed religious couples and secular couples. For instance, women in highly religious relationships are about 50% more likely to report that they are strongly satisfied with their sexual relationship than their secular and less religious counterparts.²⁹

A more recent review added that religious marriages “also tend to be more dedicated, joyful, and robust.”³⁰

This pattern holds for minority groups. In their book, *Soul Mates: Religion, Sex, Love, and Marriage Among African Americans and Latinos*, preeminent family scholars W. Bradford Wilcox and Nicholas H. Wolfinger:

Found that 80 percent of Latinos report being happy in their relationships when both partners attend church, compared to 71 percent for Latino couples who don’t go to church. With black couples, 78 percent who

attended church reported being happy[,] while the figure for non-church-going couples drops to 69 percent. (The figures for white couples are 79 percent and 70 percent, respectively.)³¹



It is also true for low-income couples. A study looked at “marital quality” among a sample of low-income couples. Marital quality consisted of “commitment of the couple, overall satisfaction, communication, intimacy/emotional support, commitment to the children, positive conflict resolution processes, and positive conflict behaviors.” The study found that “if couples share similar beliefs about God’s divine plans for them and their relationship, if they pray together, or if they attend religious services together” they experienced heightened marital quality.³²

Another data point worth noting in this regard is that spouses in highly religious couples are less likely to be involved in extramarital relationships that erode trust and stability.³³

Religion and Parenting

Five ways religion leads to better parenting:

1. Leads to positive outcomes for children
2. Promotes involved fathering
3. Increases child-parent relationship quality
4. Provides support to parents
5. Encourages warm and strong parenting

Religiosity also has implications for parenting quality. In a study looking at child outcomes based on reports from parents and teachers, researchers found:

Religious attendance of parents and a cohesive religious environment in the home yields significant benefits for children’s behavioral, emotional, and cognitive development, and such outcomes are most pronounced when both partners attend services frequently.³⁴

Specifically, “[f]requent parent–child discussions about religion often yield positive effects on child development” on measures such as social skills, social interaction, interpersonal skills, approaches to learning, and problem behaviors.³⁵ Similarly, “religious parents reduced the probability of child conduct problems by promoting religious commitment among their children.”³⁶

One way religion contributes to better parenting is by making better fathers. Examining a sample of 810 fathers in the United States, one study found that “religious fathers are more involved fathers and that they report higher quality relationships.”³⁷

Another study based on longitudinal data found that “religious affiliation and attendance” of fathers in the home led to greater involvement “in one-on-one activities, dinner with their families, and youth activities.”³⁸ Yet another study found “that conservative Protestant fathers are considerably more likely than their nonevangelical counterparts to engage in paternal supervision and affective parenting.”³⁹ Dr. W. Bradford Wilcox similarly found “that parents with conservative theological beliefs are more likely to praise and hug their children than are parents with less conservative theological views.”⁴⁰

Though there is less research, there is one long-term study that shows while religious affiliation “had no significant impact on the quality of the mother–child relationship,” actual religious practice “had significant positive effects on mothers’ and children’s reports of the quality of their relationships.”⁴¹

Religious practice can also be important. One study found that “participants who reported daily family prayer (above and beyond prayer at worship

services and meals) also reported relationship quality scores nearly a full point higher than the ‘never’ group.”⁴² Another study of adults in midwestern cities found that parents received assistance from religion because it “encourage[ed] family members to petition God for help with family problems.” The parents who said this experienced “divine intervention” and “higher levels of family satisfaction.”⁴³

review of research reported that “higher parental religious attendance was tied to parents imposing higher moral expectations and supervision on adolescents and having more influence in their offspring’s social networks (peers, other parents, teachers).” Such parents, however, also “blend[ed] greater strictness with warmth in raising children.”⁴⁶ Another study found that “religious parents were more likely to engage in warm, supportive parenting, which in turn, decreased the



Religion appears to promote particularly helpful forms of parenting. As one study explained, “parental religiosity seems to be positively associated with an authoritative parenting style and especially with more positive parent-child relationships.”⁴⁴ For example, “higher parental religious attendance substantially decreased the occurrence or potential of physical abuse.”⁴⁵ A

chances that a child would affiliate with deviant peers and experiment with delinquent behavior.”⁴⁷

Religion may also help parents navigate the stresses and challenges of parenting. A study of “parenting satisfaction and stress among young parents” found “that religiosity is associated with higher parenting satisfaction.” The authors

conclude: “Religion has a generally positive influence on parenting attitudes among young parents—both mothers and fathers—in diverse family structures.”⁴⁸

Religion can also provide crucial social support. In one study “over 200 married adults . . . from the 20 major U.S. religious denominations in two midwestern cities” were surveyed “as to the influence of religious belief and practice on family satisfaction.” The majority “reported that religion was helpful to family life.” They explained that this help came from prayer and through “enhancing the family’s social network” with those reporting more social support reporting “higher levels of family satisfaction.”⁴⁹

Finally, religion helps children in their relationships with parents. The research review noted above

pointed out that “[g]reater individual religiousness of a parent or adolescent has been repeatedly tied to adolescents feeling more satisfied with their relationship with parents.”⁵⁰ An intriguing study drawn from data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health:

Suggested that growth in personal religious salience—how important religion is in adolescents’ lives—is uniquely and consistently related to better family relations, even after accounting for behavioral changes—such as excessive drinking and drug abuse—that are detrimental to both religiosity and family relations.⁵¹

Religion and Divorce

Two ways religion discourages divorce:

1. Discourages cohabitation
2. Encourages considering big picture in divorce decisions

Among the most important questions about religiosity and marriage is whether religion can help reduce the possibility of divorce. The answer appears to be yes.

Two family scholars explain:

If we control for basic socioeconomic background and a woman's educational career trajectory, the typical marriage of a woman with a religious upbringing is about 10% less likely to end in divorce within the first 15 years of marriage than the typical marriage of a woman with a non-religious upbringing.⁵²

A 14-year longitudinal study of a large sample of American nurses found "frequent service attendance was associated with 50% lower risk of divorce, and 52% lower risk of either divorce or separation."⁵³

Again, cohabitation provides part of the reason. Research shows that "premarital cohabitation

consistently predicts higher rates of marital dissolution in the U.S."⁵⁴ This has been a consistent finding.⁵⁵ "That is, for decades in the U.S., living together before marriage has been associated with greater odds of divorce and/or lower relationship quality in marriage, and not just in a few isolated studies."⁵⁶

Thus, "one reason that women raised in a religious home are less likely to divorce is that they are less likely to cohabit prior to marrying."⁵⁷

There is another possibility. Religious teachings about the importance of marriage may influence the likelihood that people of faith will marry, and that may impact spouses thinking about divorce. Research suggests that religious considerations are often part of the divorce decision-making process.⁵⁸

Social Benefits

These links between religiosity and marriage, fertility, family relationships, and marital integrity have implications beyond people of faith and religious communities.

Most obviously, the people of faith choosing to have children prevents some of negative effects of fertility decline, like economic contraction and the associated strain on the welfare safety net. This is not to say that people of faith can or should be relied on to replace the population. Rather, religion engenders a hopeful outlook that equips them to view a future with children.

This, in turn, may encourage others to do the same. It is not surprising that in a climate of social and economic insecurity, young adults may see the obligations of marriage and childbearing with trepidation. Seeing others whose own trepidation is overcome by the commitment of faith can help allay some of those concerns.

The unique, and uniquely beneficial, child-rearing practices embraced by religious families can also provide a model for others. As family ties weaken, we can't assume that people will learn patterns of successful family from their own experience, so

being able to see examples of functional families will become more valuable and communities able to provide these models more important.

That is true not only of parenting but marital commitment as well. The model of eschewing cohabitation for the binding commitment of marriage is characterized by shared partnership and embedded in a supportive social context. This is followed by warm and authoritative parent-child relationships marked by dedicated commitments of time. This is an attractive and sustainable pattern that benefits far more than religious people.

In many ways, the decision to commit to family life is a manifestation of hope and optimism. That hope and optimism is most likely to be instilled by example more than any other factor.

Even if the patterns that characterize many families of faith are not attractive to those who do not share that faith, the benefits produced by the families formed by people of faith accrue to the whole community. Even the non-religious directly benefit from living among the well-adjusted children and family members produced by families forged in faith.

Policy Recommendations

Three policy recommendations grow naturally from the societal benefits of religion stemming from its impact on family relationships. All have to do with education in one way or the other.

In its last term, the U.S. Supreme Court decided a case that implicated the link between religion and family.⁵⁹ In that case, the Court held that state public school systems must accommodate the religious beliefs of parents to direct the moral education of their children. This is true as a constitutional matter, but it also reflects what we know about the importance of parents in the development of their children.

Beneficial parental influence on children in schools can be undercut when parents are not aware of what their children are being taught, when public schools promote instruction at odds with what parents are teaching at home, or when school districts refuse to accommodate individual family values in instructional matters. Nearly all states have laws that ensure parents are notified when their children are to be taught about sexual topics, and are given an opportunity to opt their children out of such instruction. These laws are often drafted as directions to local districts to establish policies.

This situation gives rise to two related recommendations, and a third recommendation connects directly to education for couples.

First, adopt opt-in policies instead of opt-out policies for sensitive instructional topics.

State policies should recognize that parental involvement is essential on inherently sensitive topics important to families and strong family relationships, like those that implicate sexuality. Many states maintain opt-out policies for such instructional issues – schools will teach students about sexuality as long as parents don't object. States should reverse that equation by adopting opt-in policies, where schools cannot teach students about sexuality without express parental permission.

Second, adopt broad transparency policies toward parents regarding public school instruction.

Since topics other than sexuality can undermine values parents teach at home, states should require broad transparency with parents about

topics of instruction and instructional materials. Currently, it is typically required only for sex education classes, but it should be required of all topics of instruction as a general rule.

Third, treat religious and secular relationship education/counseling programs on equal terms.

Some states promote pre-marital education and/or divorce education programs. These can be directly provided by the state or colleges and universities. Many churches also provide marriage preparation programs and counseling to couples

experiencing difficulties. States should allow some or all of such religious teaching to satisfy their requirements. Similarly, states should ensure that religious counseling about family relationships is treated the same as secular counseling when it comes to professional regulations, accreditation, etc. Given how the U.S. Supreme Court has treated unequal legal treatment between similarly situated religious and secular programs in recent years, this policy reform will both properly enforce the constitutional rights of churches and people of faith and will save taxpayers from the burden of unnecessary legal expenses.

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The inclusion of religious freedom in the Bill of Rights reflects the Framers' understanding that certain traits and aspirations of citizens are essential for a free society but cannot be created by the government. External "supports," like religion, are necessary. It makes sense to ensure that this support can operate freely and play its vital role.



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