

How Focused on the Family?

Christian Conservatives, the Family, and Sexuality

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W. Bradford Wilcox^{*}
Department of Sociology
University of Virginia
wbwilcox@virginia.edu

^{*} W. Bradford Wilcox, Department of Sociology, University of Virginia, P.O. Box 400766, Charlottesville, VA 22904-4766. I gratefully acknowledge the research assistance of Mary Caler and Jeremy Uecker, as well as the valuable editorial and substantive suggestions of Steven Brint, Peter Dobkin Hall, Stephen Macedo, Robert Putnam, and Jean Schroedel.

The family revolution of the last half-century in the United States has not, in the main, been good for democracy in America. This family revolution—characterized by a decline in the social power, functions, and moral authority of the family, and reflected by marked increases in out-of-wedlock childbearing, divorce, and single parenthood—exacted a heavy toll on the United States and its citizens.¹ Since the 1960s, family breakdown, and its consequences, has endangered the emotional and social welfare of untold numbers of children, and fueled increases in economic inequality and child poverty (Amato 2005; McLanahan 2004; Thomas and Sawhill 2002). Our country’s experience with the family revolution of the last fifty years would seem to vindicate the wisdom of Founders such as John Witherspoon and John Adams, who saw marriage as a seedbed of social virtue that the new nation could not easily do without (Cott, 2000). Indeed, even contemporary liberal political theorists—such as William Galston (1991)—and social scientists—such as Linda Waite (Waite and Gallagher 2000) —have come to see the ways in which the family revolution threatens such liberal values as equality, reason, respect for persons, and self-governance (see also Macedo 1990).

More precisely, social scientific research on the family suggests that the welfare of our nation’s citizens, particularly our most vulnerable citizens, has been deeply affected by family breakdown. Increases in out-of-wedlock births, divorce, and single parenthood account for a substantial portion of the rise in crime, child poverty, economic inequality, and substance abuse that the United States witnessed since the 1960s (Akerlof, Yellen, and Katz 1996; Sawhill 1999; Amato 2005). One Brookings study, for instance, found that recent increases in female-headed families explain most of the increase in child poverty in the nation from 1970 to 1998 (Thomas and Sawhill 2002). Another study found that changes in family structure accounted for 41 percent of the increase in income inequality in the United States between 1976 and 2000 (Martin

2006). Moreover, because family breakdown has been concentrated in poor, working-class, and minority communities, sociologist Sara McLanahan (2004: 608) concludes that this revolution in American family life has had particularly negative consequences for children in those communities, and has played an important role in fueling “widening social-class disparities in children’s resources” (see also Ellwood and Jencks 2004). In these ways, then, American citizens—especially our most vulnerable citizens: namely, children, the poor, the working class, and minorities—have paid a high price for the family revolution of the last half-century.

Family breakdown also threatens specifically liberal values such as reason, respect for persons, and self-governance. In particular, even after controlling for socioeconomic factors, studies find that children who grow up outside of an intact, married household are two to three times more likely to drop out of high school and to engage in delinquent or criminal behavior (Amato 2005), and unmarried adults are significantly less likely to participate in the nation’s political life by voting (Wolfinger and Wolfinger 2006). At the national level, the aggregate consequences of family breakdown are particularly striking. For instance, on the educational front alone, sociologist Paul Amato estimates that increasing the current percentage of adolescents who live in an intact, married family to the 1960 level of family stability would reduce the annual number of children repeating a grade by nearly three-quarters of a million and the number of school suspensions by more than one million every year. In these ways, then, the family revolution has clearly hurt the capacity of American children and adults to grow in the liberal virtues of reasonableness, respect for others, and self-governance.

Thus, in assessing the contribution that conservative Christians have made to American democracy, this essay takes up the following question: What have been the political and pastoral contributions, if any, that conservative Protestants have made to the renewal of family life in the

United States? In answering this question, I will summarize conservative Protestant family ideology, explain its cultural and social sources, and reflect on the impact that this ideology has had on American family policy, as well as the family-related beliefs and behaviors of ordinary conservative Protestants.² The conservative Protestant record in renewing family life is important, of course, because this subculture's successes and failures in focusing on the family have a lot to do with the state of the family in the American nation, which in turn—as I have argued—has much to do with the success of American democracy.

Resisting Family Change

Although most culture-producing institutions in the United States—from higher education to Hollywood to mainline Protestantism—accommodated or advanced the family revolution of the late 1960s and 1970s, conservative Protestantism resisted key elements of this family revolution. Conservative Protestant leaders and institutions did this in part by articulating a familistic ideology that endowed the family with transcendent significance as the primary locus of social, emotional, and moral life; in particular, their familistic outlook sought to preserve marriage's social status as the institutional anchor for sexual activity, childbearing, and childrearing. Partly as a consequence, conservative Protestant leaders targeted nonmarital sex, homosexuality, abortion, parenting, and divorce as topics of central concern (Wilcox 2004).

One indication of the distinctive conservative Protestant response to the family revolution comes from my survey of *Christianity Today*, the flagship journal for conservative Protestantism, and the *Christian Century*, the leading journal of mainline Protestantism. I found that *Christianity Today* devoted nearly four times as many articles and editorials to family-related topics than did the *Christian Century* from 1970 to 1990—19 percent versus 5 percent (Wilcox

2004: 52). This is one indication of the distinctive family focus in conservative Protestant circles. I also found that 58 percent of *Christianity Today*'s family-related articles from 1970 to 1990 focused on matters related to sex—including nonmarital sex, homosexuality, and abortion (Wilcox 2004: 46). In 1970, for instance, *Christianity Today* ran an editorial asking if the nation needed a “new Gibbon to write *Decline and Fall of the United States of America*” in light of “signs of decay” such as pornography, the sexual revolution, and abortion (Wilcox 2004: 44). Likewise, a 1980 resolution passed by the Southern Baptist Convention deplored the “homosexual lifestyle” and any efforts to make “it equally acceptable to the biblical heterosexual family life style” (Wilcox 2004: 47). And though abortion did not initially garner much attention among conservative Protestant institutions and leaders, they began to turn against the practice once they connected it to the sexual revolution and to what they saw as a feminist assault on motherhood. In 1980, for instance, Jerry Falwell, then head of the Moral Majority, wrote: “For six long years Americans have been forced to stand by helplessly while 3 to 6 million babies were legally murdered through abortion on demand... When a country becomes morally sick, it becomes sick in every other way” (Wilcox 2004: 47). In these ways, then, the family culture produced by conservative Protestant institutions sought to reinforce traditional normative links between sex, childbearing, and marriage by critiquing departures from traditional norms about sex and reproduction.

Conservative Protestant familism is also apparent in elite discourse on parenting and divorce. Because they see the home as a bulwark of faith and morality for God and country, conservative Protestant leaders place a high priority on fostering an ethic of intensive, affectionate, but strict parenting. In the words of one conservative Protestant leader, “If we are to rebuild our nation we must first strengthen our homes and make sure that they are Christ-

centered. Husbands and wives must assume the full responsibilities of Christian parents so that children may walk in the ways of the Lord” (Wilcox 2004: 49). Among other things, this means that parents are to conduct themselves as God does to his children—that is, they are supposed to be attentive, loving, *and* just in their interactions with their children. James Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family, put it this way: “Healthy parenthood can be boiled down to those two essential ingredients, love and control, operating in a system of checks and balances... the objective for the toddler years is to strike a balance between mercy and justice, affection and authority, love and control” (Dobson 1978: 52).

By and large, conservative Protestant elites have also expressed considerable concern with the divorce revolution of the last thirty years. For instance, Dobson had this to say about the dramatic increase in divorce in the 1970s:

Come on, America. Enough is enough! We’ve had our dance with divorce, and we have a million broken homes to show for it. We’ve tried the me-philosophy and the new morality and unbridled hedonism. They didn’t work. Now it’s time to get back to some old-fashioned values, like commitment and sacrifice and responsibility and purity and love and the straight life. Not only will our children benefit from our self-discipline and perseverance, but we adults will live in a less neurotic world, too! (Wilcox 2004: 45)

Here, however, it is important to note that conservative Protestant discourse on divorce has been more equivocal than has conservative Protestant discourse on, say, homosexuality. A large number of conservative Protestant leaders do not follow a strictly “biblical” approach to

divorce—which would only allow divorce and remarriage in cases of adultery (Matt 19:9) or the desertion of an nonbelieving spouse (1 Cor. 7: 15)—and instead argue that remarriage should be available to any believer who repents of previous marital sins; from this perspective, biblical themes of compassion, second chances, and forgiveness are deployed against more “legalistic” responses to divorce (Wilcox 2004: 48). For instance, 36 percent of Southern Baptist pastors took this more permissive view of divorce and remarriage, according to a 1980 poll (Wilcox 2004: 49). In general, then, conservative Protestantism has been a force for traditional familism, though it has been less consistent when it comes to the issue of divorce.

Understanding Conservative Protestant Family Culture

The conservative Protestant concern with the state of the family is largely rooted in three cultural and four social sources. First and foremost, conservative Protestantism subscribes to a traditional form of the Christian faith that sees the Bible as a literal and authoritative guide to moral truth. Many of conservative Protestantism’s positions—especially on topics such as premarital sex and homosexuality where numerous biblical passages speak directly to these behaviors—are derived from this traditional outlook (Wilcox 2004: 47). A lead editorial in a 1980 issue of *Christianity Today* is suggestive in this regard: “What does Scripture teach? *Heterosexuality is the biblical norm.* ... Throughout the whole of Scripture, heterosexuality is both assumed and affirmed as God’s order of creation” (Wilcox 2004: 47).

Second, conservative Protestant familism is rooted not only in its distinctive religious ideology but also in its commitment to a traditional form of Americanism that links the health of the nation to the health of the family. This is why, for instance, Dobson can be found issuing an anti-divorce appeal to Americans (“Come on, America”), rather than to Christians, or why a

conservative Protestant family expert would link Christian parenting to efforts to renew the nation (“If we are to rebuild our nation...”). The family revolution of the late 1960s and 1970s struck these conservative Protestants not only as an attack on their faith but also as an attack on the American way of life, one which they sought to resist at nearly every turn (Wilcox 2004).

Third, many conservative Protestant leaders are deeply concerned about the manifestations of the family revolution in their own lives, the lives of friends and family, and their congregations and communities. Having witnessed divorce on the rise in their churches, seen a family friend have a child outside of wedlock, or watched neighborhood children grow up without a father, these conservative Protestant leaders are quick to connect these family developments to human suffering and social decline (Wilcox 2004: 49; Smith 2000: 138-141). And hence they are motivated—as was James Dobson, who was a professor of pediatrics and a child psychologist at the University of Southern California until he started Focus on the Family in 1977—to try to do something to reverse the family revolution.

But the sources of conservative Protestant familism are rooted not only in cultural factors but also in four important social factors and processes. First, when the cultural shifts of the late 1960s and 1970s surfaced, conservative Protestants were markedly more Southern and working-class than the nation as whole. In the 1970s, 58 percent of conservative Protestants were Southern and 46 percent were high school dropouts, that is, markedly more Southern and less educated than the nation as whole in the 1970s (Wilcox 2004: 32). Because of their regional identity and class location, conservative Protestants—and their institutions—were not inclined to identify with the “ethic of liberation” then emanating from elite East and West coast centers of cultural production. Instead, they were more likely to identify with an ethic of moral order that fit

their experience of economic limitation and suited a Southern culture that relied, in part, on its religious faith to distinguish itself from the North (Wilcox 2004: 32-33).

Indeed, issues of religious identity also figure prominently in conservative Protestantism's embrace of a familistic outlook. Christian Smith has argued that religious subcultures thrive on "distinction, engagement, tension, conflict, and threat" and the vitality of evangelicalism is "not a product of its protected isolation from, but of its vigorous engagement with pluralistic modernity" (Smith 1998: 89). The distinctive ideology produced by conservative Protestantism on family-related matters has allowed this religious subculture to signal to the world and to its members that it is distinctive; the adversarial stance it takes to the broader society also helps it generate a sense of internal solidarity.

For instance, Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote a guest editorial for the *New York Times* explaining his denomination's family focus in this way: "Southern Baptists are engaged in a battle against modernity, earnestly contending for the truth and authority of an ancient faith. To the cultured critics of religion, we are the cantankerous holdouts against the inevitable. But so far as the Southern Baptist Convention is concerned, the future is in God's hands. If faithfulness requires the slings and arrows of outraged opponents, so be it" (Wilcox 2004: 63). Martial language like this on family matters helps to build a strong sense of collective identity among conservative Protestants. The success that conservative Protestant elites have in connecting their faith to familism also explains in part why conservative Protestants have retained traditional family values even as they have experienced marked social mobility in the last four decades (Wilcox 2004: 62-63). That is, even though conservative Protestants have in some respects become more integrated into mainstream society, they still

hold on to their unusual family-related ideology because this ideology helps them build and sustain a distinctive collective identity (Gallagher 2003).

Third, conservative Protestantism has been able to articulate and defend its familistic ideology, even when elements of this ideology are unpopular, because of the large collection of institutional resources it controls. Conservative Protestantism has a multi-billion-dollar publishing industry, more than 400 colleges and seminaries, more than 100,000 congregations, and hundreds of special purpose organizations, such as Focus on the Family. For instance, Focus on the Family has an annual budget exceeding \$100 million dollars, employs more than a 1,000 persons, broadcasts a radio show on more than 2,900 stations in North America, and boasts 2.3 million members who draw regularly on its audio, video, web, and literary offerings (Wilcox 1998; Wilcox 2004). These institutional resources provide this tradition with the means to resist, at least to a degree, many of the broader cultural trends in the United States.

Fourth, conservative Protestants—partly because of their socioeconomic status—have been particularly vulnerable to the practical manifestations of the family revolution. As this paper indicates below, conservative Protestants, especially nominal conservative Protestants, and the communities they live in have been especially affected by the family revolution; for instance, divorce is more common among nominal conservative Protestants and Southerners than it is in the nation as a whole.³ These changes—coupled with their distinctive theological and moral commitments—have also contributed to conservative Protestants’ deep concern about the state of the American family, their own families, and the families in their communities. In the words of pollsters Stanley Greenberg and Anna Greenberg, “They... are alarmed about pervasive moral laxity and threats to the traditional family” (Greenberg and Greenberg 2004). The irony, here, of course, is that one reason that conservative Protestants are talking right on family matters is that

they do not like the fact that they have walked left or that their friends, family members, or neighbors have walked left on family matters.

Indeed, their own failures in family domains such as divorce helps to explain why—at least at the pastoral level—conservative rhetoric around homosexuality has been more strident than conservative Protestant rhetoric around divorce. Homosexual desires and behaviors affect a relatively small number of conservative Protestants; divorce, by contrast, affects a large minority of conservative Protestants (Greeley and Hout 2006: 132-133, 146). For this reason, among others, pastors and conservative Protestant leaders probably feel more comfortable signaling their familistic commitments by attacking homosexuality rather than divorce. And, as we have seen, they also appear somewhat more willing to look for the spirit of the Gospel rather than the letter of the biblical law when it comes to divorce, as opposed to homosexuality.

Nevertheless, even though they have softened their position on divorce to some degree, conservative Protestantism has been a major voice for familism in the United States in the last three decades. This support is particularly striking because most major cultural producing institutions in the United States and in Europe have not articulated a strong familistic ideology or resisted the family revolution in sharp terms. (Of course, there are non-religious exceptions to this general trend; for instance, a growing number of academics and policy makers have underlined the public purposes served by marriage in recent years. See McLanahan *et al.* 2005 and Wilcox *et al.* 2005.) Undoubtedly, conservative Protestantism's distinctive religious ideology and its substantial command of institutional resources—among other factors—has enabled it to chart a different course than most culture-producing institutions when it comes to the family.

Conservative Protestant Discourse and Influence Regarding Family Policy

Conservative and family organizations founded and supported by conservative Protestants have emerged as major players in family-related policy in the last two decades. At the national level, since the late 1970s, Conservative Christians have founded groups like the Christian Coalition (1989), Concerned Women for America (1979), Focus on the Family (1977), and the Family Research Council (1983) to promote their pro-family agenda (Wilcox 2002; Wilcox 2004). At the state level, 35 groups have been formed since 1988—many at the behest of Focus on the Family—to promote a range of family-related policies.⁴ Pro-life organizations, such the American Life League and the National Right to Life Committee, also rely on conservative Protestant support, though these organizations also draw substantial practical and financial support from Catholics. Collectively, these groups attract regular support from more than three million Americans and annually raise more than two-hundred million dollars to advance their agendas; these institutional resources help them play an important role in contemporary debates about abortion, divorce, same-sex marriage, and stem-cell research.⁵

These family-oriented organizations have pursued a mix of policies. In the last three years, for instance, the Georgia Family Council has focused on divorce reform, marriage education, and school choice.⁶ Over the same period, the Family Research Council has focused on abortion, pornography, religious freedom, and same-sex marriage.⁷ Even though the diverse policy agendas of these institutions and their leaders are shaped by religious commitments and theological ideas, their public discourse tends to be secular. Specifically, these family-oriented organizations rely on utilitarian, scientific, and therapeutic arguments that they think have a greater chance of resonating with the public and especially with the policy and media elites who tend to set the terms of public discourse (Wilcox 2002).

Conservative Protestant leaders report that their own experience with legislators, journalists, and the public has led them to believe that overtly religious appeals are not as effective as are appeals that conform to the largely utilitarian, scientific, or therapeutic canons of discourse in the public square. For instance, Tony Perkins, who is currently president of the Family Research Council, was one of the primary sponsors of Louisiana's 1997 covenant marriage law, when he was a state representative. Perkins reports that his initial bill on covenant marriage was shaped by his own reading of biblical teachings on divorce and marriage, and by input he received from pastors in his district (Wilcox 2002: 9). But Perkins says he did not refer to the Bible in arguing for covenant marriage because the society is moving in a "post-Christian" direction and because most people don't understand how the Bible would be applied in a legislative context (Wilcox 2002: 13). Instead, he relied on social scientific evidence about the effects of divorce to make his public case for covenant marriage, which allows couples to enter into marriages that provide more restrictive grounds for divorce (abuse, adultery, a felony conviction, or abandonment) than does conventional marriage in Louisiana (Nock 2005).

On the other hand, some conservative Protestant politicians also report that they do not wish to impose positions shaped only by religious beliefs on the public. Thus, they argue that they only pursue policies that have some reasonable connection to the common good (Wilcox 2002: 13). For instance, Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, who has also pushed through covenant marriage and a range of other marriage-related policies in Arkansas, argues that his policy agenda is not directed by his faith, even though he is a former Baptist minister. "[I] have tried not to assume that my position as Governor gave me the right to impose my faith on others," reports Huckabee (Wilcox 2002: 13).

Similarly, Wade Horn, former Assistant Secretary for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the Bush administration's point man on marriage policy, has said that his marriage agenda is directed to the common good, not his Presbyterian faith. He says there is a "line as a government official between being motivated [by faith] and then taking it and imposing it as the only proper view on a particular question [like marriage]." Horn adds that his agenda is driven by "what empirical literature tells us, not just what our personal faith tells us" (Wilcox 2002: 13). Although Huckabee's and Horn's support for marriage policy is undoubtedly shaped by their theological and ideological commitments, their understanding of their own approach to family policy, as well as their secular tactics, are indicative of the increasing sophistication and maturation of conservative Protestant efforts to influence American debates about life issues, sexuality, and marriage. More and more, conservative Protestant groups are trying to influence public discussions and policies related to the family by approaching the contemporary public square in a secular spirit—that is, with a desire to pursue the common good or at least to rely on secular reason and arguments in their pursuit of a religiously-grounded good.

On the other hand, one striking and implicitly religious feature of the legislative agenda advanced by conservative Protestant family groups is that they rarely pay attention to the economic or material challenges facing American families. Rarely do state and particularly national pro-family organizations directed by conservative Protestants make a full court press for policies such as expanded child tax credits, universal health care vouchers, or the elimination of the substantial marriage penalties facing poor and working-class Americans.⁸ Instead, they remain preoccupied with "values" issues (Smith 2000: 28). Their preoccupation with public policies that focus explicitly on moral matters rather than economic matters is largely an

outgrowth of a conservative Protestant theological emphasis on personal moral and spiritual renewal as the key to societal renewal. Many ordinary and elite conservative Protestants seem to think that family renewal in the United States is achievable simply through widespread religious conversion or cultural change. Partly because they do not have a tradition of sustained reflection on social ethics, like Roman Catholicism and mainline Protestantism, conservative Protestants and their pro-family organizations do not believe or are unaware of the possibility that social structural changes may also be required for the renewal of family life. Thus, their policy agenda is typically limited to “values”-related public policies such as same-sex marriage and stem-cell research.

When it comes to advancing their public policy agenda, Conservative Protestant leaders and organizations have had varying degrees of success. In general, their record of success is closely connected to the level of popular support their legislative objectives engender at the federal or state level. This mixed record of success is reflected on life issues such as abortion and stem-cell research. For instance, in the 1990s, pro-family and pro-life organizations succeeded in getting legislation mandating parental consent in cases involving abortion for minors passed in 27 states (New 2007: 2). Most of these states are culturally conservative, and pro-life groups have been able to take advantage of the political climate in these states, as well as the fact that most Americans believe that parents should have a role in deciding whether or not their teenage daughters get an abortion (New 2007: 15).⁹ By contrast, pro-family groups have been less successful in stopping public initiatives to fund or allow stem-cell research in states with large numbers of liberal or moderate-minded citizens, in part because of the state political climate and in part because stem-cell research enjoys the support of a majority of Americans.¹⁰ In the last five years, for instance, pro-stem-cell legislation or policies have passed or been implemented by

executive order in nine states—from California to Missouri to New Jersey; in most of these states, a coalition of scientists, medical professionals, and patient advocacy organizations (e.g., the National Parkinson Foundation) spearheaded efforts to pass pro-stem-cell legislation or propositions.¹¹

Conservative Protestant groups have also had mixed success on marriage policy. After the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts ruled that same-sex marriage was required by the Massachusetts' constitution in 2004, conservative Christian groups launched efforts to amend state constitutions to prohibit same-sex marriage, as well as an effort to amend the U.S. constitution. The latter effort has failed so far, but these groups have succeeded in passing anti-same-sex marriage constitutional amendments in 27 states (losing so far only in Arizona).¹² At the federal level, they also helped the Bush Administration pass a \$500 million Healthy Marriage Initiative in 2006; this initiative is designed primarily to provide relationship skills and social services to low-income couples interested in getting marrying or staying married (Nock 2005).¹³ Legislative successes in these domains can be attributed to widespread popular opposition to gay marriage, to more modest support for government programs to promote marriage, and to the fact that most legislators are not strongly opposed—at a personal level—to these policies.¹⁴

On the other hand, conservative Christian groups have had little success in their efforts to reform divorce laws at the state level. Recent efforts on the part of pro-family organizations in Georgia, Michigan, and Virginia to make modest changes to state divorce laws have not succeeded. In Georgia, for instance, the Georgia Family Council tried to extend the waiting period for married couples with children who are seeking a divorce from 30 days to 120 days. Their effort failed. Randy Hicks, the president of the Georgia Family Policy Council, attributes their failure to two factors: first, many legislators are divorce attorneys and have a vested interest

in current divorce law and, second, many legislators and ordinary citizens in Georgia have been divorced. As a consequence, in Hicks' experience, legislators and citizens both bridle at any suggestion that they have done anything wrong and are also "concerned about government becoming more involved in people's lives by extending the waiting period on divorce."¹⁵ Family advocates working in other states report similar challenges in reforming divorce (Wilcox 2002: 13). Their difficulties are not surprising, given that only 37 percent of the American public thinks that divorce laws should be tightened, according a 1999 TIME/CNN poll, and that a large minority—29 percent—of American adults are divorced, according to 2000-2002 General Social Survey (GSS) data.¹⁶

In sum, then, efforts by pro-family organizations have met with mixed success, in part because some of their objectives do not enjoy widespread popular support. On the other hand, these organizations have been influential precisely because they have been willing to spearhead causes that are popular among ordinary Americans but not always among policy, media, and academic elites—such as the drive against same-sex marriage. When they highlight these issues and pressure politicians to vote in conformity with majority opinion, they are exercising a unique role in American public life and family policy. In other words, on a number of family-related issues, they represent the only organized institutional force advancing a more traditional perspective that has popular but not elite support, and their leadership can crystallize popular support for traditional family causes that would otherwise be ignored or rejected by elites. Indeed, their efforts on behalf of conservative family-related causes is one reason that American public discourse and public policy remains more conservative, and more ideologically heterogenous, than family-related discourse and policy in other Western countries (for a similar point regarding American exceptionalism when it comes to sex education, see Luker 2006).¹⁷

Family-related Beliefs and Behaviors among Conservative Protestants

Conservative Protestant institutions and elites responded in a distinctive fashion to the family revolution of the last half-century in the United States. Unlike many culture-forming institutions in the U.S. and the West more generally, they sought to resist this family revolution and renew family life in America by producing and promoting a familistic ideology. At the pastoral level, how successful have they been in shaping the beliefs and behaviors of ordinary conservative Protestants?

To adequately answer this question, I must first address the subject of religious effects on human beliefs and behaviors. The social scientific literature on religion indicates that religion influences family-related beliefs and behaviors through—among other things—theological beliefs and religiously-grounded moral norms related to the family, social networks that offer social support and control for a range of family-related beliefs and behaviors, and a religious nomos that endows family life with transcendent meaning and purpose, and buffers against the stresses that can hurt family life. In part because they are exposed to these norms, networks, and a religious nomos more frequently, and in part because they are more likely to have a salient religious faith that they connect to their family lives, persons who attend religious services on a regular basis—that is, several times a month or more—are more likely to have their family-related beliefs and behaviors shaped by the religious tradition to which they are affiliated than are persons who attend services on a nominal basis (Wilcox 2004: 99-14; Regnerus 2007: 43-56). Consequently, in discussing the links between conservative Protestantism and family life, I will distinguish between effects for active and nominal members of the conservative Protestant tradition. Approximately 12 percent of the American population attends conservative Protestant

churches several times a month or more, and 10 percent of the American population is only nominally affiliated with this tradition, attending such churches once a month or less, according to GSS data from 1998 to 2002.

My analysis of GSS data from 1974 to 2002 suggests that conservative Protestantism has largely been successful in fostering a more familistic outlook among its members. Take premarital sex. From 1974 to 2002, conservative Protestants remained markedly more traditional than other Americans on this issue. In 1974, 49 percent of conservative Protestants reported the view that sex before marriage is “always wrong,” compared to 28 percent of other Americans; in 2002, 57 percent of conservative Protestants held this view, compared to 24 percent of other Americans. Among conservative Protestants attending church several times a month or more, opposition was even stronger: in 1974, 60 percent of active conservative Protestants always opposed premarital sex, whereas in 2002, 64 percent of active conservative Protestants took this position. Moreover, my statistical models indicate that the effects of conservative Protestantism, especially churchgoing conservative Protestantism, far outweigh the effects of sociodemographic factors such as education, gender, and age in shaping public opinion about premarital sex.¹⁸

With respect to divorce, another important indicator of familism, conservative Protestants have become slightly more familistic (as has the population at large). From 1974 to 2002, opposition to divorce rose. In 1974, 58 percent of conservative Protestants reported the view that divorce should be “more difficult to obtain,” compared to 41 percent of other Americans; in 2002, 70 percent of conservative Protestants took that view, compared to 49 percent of other Americans. Among frequently attending conservative Protestants, opposition to divorce rose from 71 percent to 75 percent over this time period. My analysis of the GSS data indicate that a conservative Protestant affiliation, and especially an active conservative Protestant affiliation,

was strongly associated with opposition to divorce and was a better predictor of divorce attitudes than were sociodemographic factors such as education, gender, and age.¹⁹

These results suggest that conservative Protestant institutions have been successful at resisting the family revolution at the level of family ideology. Conservative Protestant views on premarital sex and divorce have become somewhat more familistic since the 1970s, and churchgoing conservative Protestants are significantly more familistic than average Americans. Of course, conservative Protestant views on family matters are not monolithic; for instance, about one-third of churchgoing conservative Protestants do not think premarital sex is “always wrong,” even though virtually no conservative Protestant leader would endorse such a view. Nevertheless, my research suggests that no other major religious group or institutional player in the United States has been as successful in getting its members to subscribe to a familistic ideology as has conservative Protestantism. Accordingly, at least when it comes to family-related beliefs, conservative Protestant institutions have been surprisingly successful in resisting the family revolution.

On the other hand, a close look at the influence that conservative Protestantism has had on family-related behaviors such as premarital sex, cohabitation, marriage, divorce, and parenting suggests a more mixed portrait of conservative Protestant effectiveness in shaping family-related behaviors. On some outcomes, conservative Protestants do indeed behave in a more familistic fashion than the population at large; however, on other outcomes conservative Protestants behave in ways that are not markedly different from the population at large.

In terms of sexuality and cohabitation, the picture is mixed—especially when it comes to nominal conservative Protestants. Surprisingly, my analysis of the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) indicates that conservative Protestant adolescents typically have sex at a

slightly earlier age than other adolescents—respectively, 16.38 years-old versus 16.52 years-old. For churchgoing conservative Protestants the mean age of first sex is 16.86, whereas for nominal conservative Protestants the mean age is 16.23. Multivariate analyses incorporating controls for a range of socioeconomic factors indicate that the differences between other Americans and nominal conservative Protestants, as well as conservative Protestants as a whole, are not statistically significant; by contrast, churchgoing conservative Protestants are marginally more likely ($p < .10$) to delay first sex.²⁰ On the whole, then, conservative Protestant teenage sexual behavior is not different than the population at large, even though conservative Protestant teens are more likely to subscribe to a traditional understanding of sex in theory.

On the other hand, NSFG data indicate that conservative Protestant young adults are less likely to cohabit than are other Americans. Only 6 percent of conservative Protestant young adults aged 15-44 are cohabiting, compared to 10 percent of other young adults. Nevertheless, the patterns of cohabitation among conservative Protestants diverge markedly by church attendance. Among those who attend church weekly, only 1 percent of conservative Protestant young adults cohabit—the lowest figure for any major religious tradition in the U.S.; by contrast, 10 percent of nominal conservative Protestant young adults cohabit. This means that nominal conservative Protestants are no different than other young adults in their cohabitation rates. These patterns stand up in a multivariate context; that is, after controlling for socioeconomic factors, unmarried young conservative Protestants, especially churchgoing ones, are less likely to cohabit than their peers, whereas nominal conservative Protestants are about as likely to cohabit as their peers.²¹

When it comes to childbearing, marriage, and divorce, the picture is, once again, mixed: some behaviors seem congruent with conservative Protestant familism, others not. Conservative

Protestant women are less likely to bear a child out of wedlock than are other American women. Data taken from the 2002 NSFG indicate that 24 percent of children born to conservative Protestant mothers are born out of wedlock, compared to 33 percent of other American children. Furthermore, churchgoing conservative Protestants are particularly likely to avoid nonmarital childbearing. Only 12 percent of children born to churchgoing conservative Protestant women are born out of wedlock. On the other hand, 33 percent of children born to nominal conservative Protestant women are born out of wedlock; this means, once again, that nominal conservative Protestant women are no different than other women in the United States. Multivariate models that control for socioeconomic factors indicate that these bivariate patterns are only partially replicated after I control for socioeconomic factors. Specifically, only churchgoing conservative Protestant women are significantly less likely to bear a child outside of wedlock than are other American women; their nominal peers, and average conservative Protestant women, are no different than other American women.²²

Conservative Protestants are more likely to be married than other Americans; they marry at younger ages than other Americans, and are significantly more likely to be currently married than are other adults (Eggebeen and Dew 2007). My estimates from 1998-2002 GSS data indicate that 54 percent of conservative Protestant adults are married, compared to 45 percent of other adults. Frequent conservative Protestant churchgoers are especially likely to be married: 59 percent of active conservative Protestants are married, compared to 47 percent of nominal conservative Protestants. (Note, here, once again, that nominal conservative Protestants are no different—statistically speaking—in the likelihood that are married compared to other American adults.) No other major religious or secular group in the U.S. is as likely to be married (with the possible exception of Mormons, for whom there are not enough cases in the GSS to determine

with sufficient statistical certainty their marriage rates). Note that these bivariate patterns hold up in multivariate models where I control for socioeconomic factors such as age, education, race, and region.²³ So conservative Protestants, especially churchgoing conservative Protestants, do seem to be particularly attached to the married state.

On the other hand, conservative Protestants are not any more likely to stay married than the population at large. My analyses of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) indicates that married conservative Protestants were slightly more likely to divorce than other married Americans between 1988 and 1993, though the differences were not statistically significant. Specifically, between the two waves of the NSFH, about 10 percent of conservative Protestant married couples divorced, compared to approximately 9 percent of other married couples. But here again, religious attendance matters. Only 7 percent of churchgoing conservative Protestant couples divorced in this time period, compared to 16 percent of nominal conservative Protestant couples. Indeed, after controlling for socioeconomic factors, my statistical analyses of the NSFH indicate that churchgoing conservative Protestant couples are marginally ($p < .10$) less likely to divorce than other Americans, whereas nominal conservative Protestants are significantly more likely to divorce than other Americans.²⁴ So, when it comes to divorce, religious attendance is a strong marker dividing divorce-averse churchgoing conservative Protestants from their divorce-prone nominal peers.

Finally, when it comes to parenting, I find—consistent with their commitment to the ideology of familism—that conservative Protestants are significantly more likely to be active and affectionate parents, compared to other Americans (Wilcox 1998). For instance, using data from the 1987-1988 NSFH and controlling for a range of sociodemographic factors such as income, education, and race, I find that conservative Protestant mothers and fathers are more likely to

praise and hug their school-age children than are other American parents (Wilcox 1998: 804). Likewise, after controlling for a range of sociodemographic factors, I find that conservative Protestant fathers spend about 2.0 hours more per week on youth activities such as sports activities, scouting programs, and religious youth groups, compared to unaffiliated fathers (Wilcox 2004: 229). Once again, churchgoing conservative Protestant fathers stand out: they spend 3.75 more hours per week on such activities than do unaffiliated fathers, whereas nominal conservative Protestant fathers are not significantly different from unaffiliated fathers (Wilcox 2004).²⁵ So, again, conservative Protestant fathers who are churchgoing are markedly more family-oriented than their nominal peers.

How do we make sense of conservative Protestantism's mixed record when it comes to family-related behaviors? Part of the story here regarding sex, cohabitation, and divorce involves class. Conservative Protestants tend to be less educated than other Americans and, as a consequence, are more vulnerable to early sex and divorce.²⁶ This paper indicates that nominal conservative Protestants are especially likely to fail to live up to the familistic standards of this subculture; this may be in part because nominal conservative Protestants—particularly those who hail from poor and working-class communities in the South marked by higher levels of family breakdown (Lesthaeghe and Neidert 2006)—are not benefiting from the family-oriented social networks and religious nomos cultivated by religious congregations. Indeed, as noted above, nominal conservative Protestants' inability to meet familistic standards on many outcomes may help explain why churchgoing conservative Protestants are so concerned about the family. If churchgoing conservative Protestants see their nominal friends, family members, and neighbors engaging in premarital sex, cohabitation, nonmarital childbearing, or divorce, that may heighten their desire to focus personal and pastoral attention on the family (Wilcox 2004).

Finally, Christian Smith has argued that the distinctive moral beliefs articulated by conservative Protestants are designed to build collective identity as much or more than they are designed to shape personal behavior (Smith 1998). Thus, one reason that some conservative Protestant family-related beliefs are only “loosely coupled” to family-related behaviors may be that these beliefs’ primary purpose is not to guide behavior but rather to serve as markers of conservative Protestantism’s religious and moral traditionalism (Wilcox 2004: 194-196). For instance, the Southern Baptist Convention’s vociferous public support for traditional marriage even in the face of high rates of divorce among Baptists may have as much to do with the church’s effort to signal its symbolic position vis-à-vis liberal modernity (recall Al Mohler’s desire to “battle against modernity”) as it does with any effort to influence the marital behavior of Southern Baptists (Wilcox 2004: 194).

Still, despite the fact that conservative Protestants do not live in complete conformity with their familistic beliefs, it is worth noting that the more devout conservative Protestants—that is, those who attend church several times a month or more—tend to live more familistic lives than most Americans. Churchgoing conservative Protestants are less likely to cohabit, have fewer children out of wedlock, marry at higher rates than the national average, divorce at lower rates than the national average, and have higher rates of parental affection than the national average. The family-oriented norms, networks, and nomos that conservative Protestants encounter in their congregations and in parachurch institutions like Focus on the Family often, if not always, foster a more family-centered way of life.

Conclusion

In the last two decades, a growing consensus has emerged among social scientists that marriage serves the common good and especially the welfare of children. As Ron Haskins, Sara McLanahan, and Elisabeth Donahue recently observed in a Princeton-Brookings policy brief, “Marriage provides benefits both to children and society. Although it was once possible to believe that the nation’s high rates of divorce, cohabitation, and nonmarital childbearing represented little more than lifestyle alternatives brought about by the freedom to pursue individual self-fulfillment, many analysts now believe that these individual choices can be damaging to the children who have no say in them and to the society that enables them” (Haskins, McLanahan and Donahue 2005: 1). This paper has sought to determine how much conservative Protestantism has contributed to the American democracy by renewing marriage as the primary institutional anchor for sexual activity, childbearing, childrearing, and the adult lifecourse.

In the public sphere, conservative Protestant institutions and elites have a record of mixed success in shaping public policy and public opinion related to family matters. They have scored successes on issues where public opinion is with them—for example, gay marriage—but have not made headway on issues where public opinion is against them—for example, reforming divorce law. Furthermore, their theological commitment to individual moral and spiritual renewal has led many pro-family institutions and elites from the world of conservative Protestantism to overlook the need to advance economic policies to strengthen American families. This is a major blind spot, given the influence that economic forces have on American families.

Nevertheless, in a number of policy domains, the presence and voice of conservative Protestant institutions and elites in the American public square has pushed federal and state

policy in a more pro-marriage direction. For instance, sociologist Andrew Cherlin recently pointed out that “marriage policy”—including the Bush administration’s \$500 million Healthy Marriage Initiative—has recently received a great deal of attention in the U.S., even though virtually no political actors in Europe are concerned with marriage policies (Cherlin, 2007). Undoubtedly, one reason that marriage policy is a going concern in the U.S. is because of the determined advocacy, the substantial institutional resources, and the political influence of conservative Protestant family organizations. Thus, marriage in the United States has more institutional power and influence—including higher levels of policy support and a distinctive legislative standing in family law—than it does in Northern European countries such as Norway and Sweden in part because pro-family organizations have sought to both resist the deinstitutionalization of marriage and to strengthen marriage, and have substantial resources they can bring to the public sphere to advance their agenda.

In the pastoral sphere, conservative Protestant institutions and elites have also had mixed success in fostering strong families in their own subculture. On the one hand, drawing largely on their traditional religious belief system and their substantial institutional resources, they have largely succeeded in articulating and fostering a distinctively familistic ideology among their members (and conservative Christians in other traditions). On the other hand, the conservative Protestant record of success when it comes to shaping behavior is not uniformly good. Particularly in reference to premarital sex and divorce, conservative Protestants do worse than the population at large. Nevertheless, they are more likely to bear children in wedlock, to be married, and to be involved and affectionate parents than the population at large. And, in fairness to conservative Protestants, I also find that churchgoing conservative Protestants who are being exposed to the familistic messages and networks found in this subculture typically do better than

average Americans on virtually every family outcome this paper examined. Finally, conservative Protestants also face class handicaps that many other Americans do not face, and which make it more difficult for them to abide by their familistic beliefs.

In sum, then, in the public and pastoral domains of American life, conservative Protestants have made modest contributions to resisting the family revolution of the last half-century and to renewing marriage in the United States. In my view, if they aim to achieve more substantial success in renewing American family life they will have to broaden their policy agenda (and their rhetoric) beyond “values” issues to include economic issues that affect the quality and stability of family life in the United States. They will also have to make a more sustained and sophisticated effort to offer secular reasons, arguments, and stories in a wide range of elite and popular venues to push the broader culture (as opposed to just their own subculture) in a more familistic direction. For instance, conservative Protestant family organizations could do a better job of identifying, supporting, and promoting marriage-friendly scholars in the social sciences, as well as marriage-friendly writers, producers, and actors in Hollywood. Without such efforts to expand their agenda and to make their public case more attractive, and less sectarian, conservative Protestant family organizations and elites are not likely to renew marriage in the United States and, more broadly, to strengthen American democracy.

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NOTES

¹ I use the term “family revolution” to encompass the range of behavioral and normative changes in American family life that occurred primarily in the late 1960s and the 1970s in the United States (Ellwood and Jencks 2004; McLanahan 2004). Here, I am thinking specifically of increases in premarital sex, nonmarital childbearing, divorce, and their normative concomitants. Given that these changes occurred at the same time, and reflect in one way or another the deinstitutionalization of marriage as the social institution designed to govern sex, childbearing, childrearing, and the adult life course (Cherlin 2004), I think it appropriate to refer to these related changes as components of a larger social “revolution” in American family life.

² By “conservative Protestants,” I am referring to American men and women who belong to theologically-conservative denominations such as the Southern Baptist Convention, Assemblies of God, and the Evangelical Free Church. More broadly, this term captures Protestants who would typically be classified as evangelical Protestants, fundamentalist Protestants, or Pentecostal Protestants. See Steensland *et al.* (2000).

³ On conservative Protestant divorce, see Wilcox and Williamson (2006). On divorce in the South, see Lesthaeghe and Neidert (2006).

⁴ <http://www.citizenlink.org/fpc/>. (Accessed April 1, 2007).

⁵ My estimates of group membership and budgets for these organizations are derived from information assembled by People for the American Way. <http://www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/default.aspx?oid=158>. (Accessed April 1, 2007).

⁶ Randy Hicks, president of Georgia Family Council, personal interview, March 22, 2007.

⁷ <http://www.frc.org/get.cfm?c=HOME>. (Accessed April 1, 2007).

⁸ For a discussion of public policies influencing the economic welfare of families, see Douthat and Salam (2005).

⁹ For data on American views about parental consent and abortion, see <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=253>. (Accessed April 1, 2007).

¹⁰ <http://www.abcnews.go.com/sections/politics/DailyNews/poll010626.html>. (Accessed April 1, 2007).

¹¹ The states that have passed legislation, propositions, or garnered executive orders funding stem-cell research are California, Connecticut, Illinois, Massachusetts, Maryland, New Jersey, Washington, and Wisconsin. Legislatures passed stem-cell bills in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maryland, New Jersey, and Washington. Governors took executive action to fund stem-cell research in Illinois and Washington. And, the voters passed the pro-stem-cell proposition 71 in California providing \$3 billion in bonds for research beginning in 2005. For details, see <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/health/genetics/embfet.htm>. (Accessed July 6, 2007). In addition, in 2006, Missouri voters approved the Stem Cell Research and Cures Amendment, which allows stem-cell research and stem-cell-derived therapies to be conducted in the state. See <http://www.missouricures.com/amendment.php>. (Accessed July 6, 2007). See also

<http://www.stltoday.com/stltoday/news/columnists.nsf/jomannies/story/589A01B95A761499862572AD00139595?OpenDocument>. (Accessed April 1, 2007).

¹² The following states have passed constitutional amendments prohibiting same-sex marriage since gay marriage was legalized in Massachusetts in 2004: Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, and Wisconsin. See <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Family/Marriage50>. (Accessed July 6, 2007).

¹³ See also <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/about/mission.html#goals>. (Accessed April 1, 2007).

¹⁴ For polling data on same-sex marriage, see

<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/07/30/opinion/polls/main565918.shtml>. For polling data on the Healthy Marriage Initiative, see http://www.futureofchildren.org/newsletter2861/newsletter_show.htm?doc_id=321689. (Accessed April 1, 2007).

¹⁵ Hicks, personal interview, March 22, 2007.

¹⁶ I analyzed data from the 2000 and 2002 waves of the General Social Survey to determine what percentage of American adults aged 18 and older had ever been divorced. The GSS data indicate that 29 percent of American adults have been divorced. For the Time/CNN poll data, see <http://patriot.net/~crouch/wash/timetable.html>. (Accessed April 1, 2007). For data on the prevalence of divorce, see Cherlin (2008).

¹⁷ For a similar point, see Luker (2006).

¹⁸ These figures are based on my analysis of 1974-2002 GSS data. Here, frequent churchgoing is defined as attending church several times a month or more.

¹⁹ For data on conservative Protestants and divorce, see *Ibid*, pp. 78, 217. Note that figures for “other Americans” were calculated from 1974-1998 GSS data specifically for this paper. Here, frequent churchgoing is defined as attending church several times a month or more.

²⁰ These figures are based on analyses of the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). Here, frequent churchgoing is defined as attending weekly or more. Multivariate models control for age, education, race, ethnicity, gender, family structure at age 15, and region.

²¹ These figures are based on analyses of the 2002 NSFG. Once again, multivariate models control for age, education, race, ethnicity, gender, family structure at age 15, and region.

²² These estimates are based on 2002 NSFG data. Once again, multivariate models control for age, education, race, ethnicity, gender, family structure at age 15, and region.

²³ These estimates are based on analyses of 1998-2002 GSS data. Here, frequent churchgoing is defined as attending several times a month or more.

²⁴ These figures are based on analyses of Wave 1 (1987-1988) and Wave 2 (1992-1994) of the National Survey of Families and Households. For these analyses, frequent church attendance is defined as attending once a week or more. Multivariate models of divorce control for age, region, ethnicity, race, and education. Note that the lower divorce rate for churchgoing conservative Protestants was significant at the $p < .10$ level.

²⁵ Here, frequent churchgoing is defined as attending church several times a month or more.

²⁶ For instance, after controlling for sociodemographic factors including education, the association between conservative Protestantism and divorce in the NSFH declines by about 75 percent.