

# Parental Divorce and Religious Involvement among Young Adults\*

Jiexia Elisa Zhai  
Christopher G. Ellison  
Norval D. Glenn  
University of Texas at Austin

Elizabeth Marquardt  
Institute for American Values

*Surprisingly few studies have explored the implications of parental divorce for the religious involvement of offspring, especially in young adulthood. Our study addresses several theoretical arguments linking parental divorce with reduced religious involvement in young adulthood and tests relevant hypotheses using data from a unique sample of 1,500 young adults (ages 18-35), evenly divided between offspring of divorce and offspring from intact nuclear families. Results show that parental divorce is associated with substantially lower self-reported religious involvement among young adults; however, there are no effects of parental divorce on non-organizational religiousness (prayer activity) or subjective religiousness (feelings of closeness to God). The link between parental divorce and religious attendance appears to be due to the lower levels of paternal (father's) involvement in childhood and adolescent religious socialization among the offspring of divorce. A number of implications of these findings are discussed.*

## INTRODUCTION

The United States experienced a sharp rise in divorce rates during the 1960s and the 1970s. Despite declines in these rates since the early 1980s, they still remain quite high by historical standards (Cherlin 1992; Heaton 2002). This has

\*Direct correspondence to: Jiexia Elisa Zhai, Department of Sociology, 1 University Station, A 1700, University of Texas, Austin, TX 78712 (jzhai@mail.la.utexas.edu). The authors thank Neal Krause, Daniel Powers, Mark Regnerus, Michael Roemer, Catherine Ross, Robert D. Woodberry, and the anonymous reviewers for helpful comments and suggestions. Data collection was funded by the Lilly Endowment and conducted under the auspices of the Institute for American Values. The second author's work on this project was partly supported by grants from the Lilly Endowment and the John Templeton Foundation (Metanexus Institute). However, the analyses and conclusions presented here are those of the authors alone, and the authors are solely responsible for any errors of fact or interpretation.

led researchers to investigate the consequences of divorce for spouses as well as other family members, and especially for the offspring of divorce. Although this topic is hotly debated, some studies have linked parental divorce with a number of unfavorable developmental outcomes, including diminished academic achievement and socioeconomic mobility (Astone and McLanahan 1991; Biblarz and Raftery 1993; Amato and Booth 1997), increased risk of behavioral problems, and various mental and physical health conditions (McLanahan and Bumpass 1988; Amato and Booth 1997).

Surprisingly, few studies have examined the implications of parental divorce for the religious and spiritual lives of children, particularly as they move into adulthood. Despite the dearth of direct empirical evidence on this topic, there are sound theoretical reasons to anticipate that offspring of divorce may be less engaged in religious or spiritual pursuits in young adulthood, as compared with their counterparts from intact families. They may, for example, be less closely tied to organized religion and perhaps less inclined toward private acts of devotion or personal spiritual experience.

Our study explores this issue using data from a unique source, a sample of 1,506 young adults (ages 18-35), 751 of whom experienced parental divorce prior to age 15 and 755 of whom did not. In addition to assessing the impact of divorce on young adults' religious attendance, personal prayer, and feelings of closeness to God, we also consider several possible explanations for the estimated effects of parental divorce. In particular, we draw upon theoretical perspectives that have been used to account for variations in the intergenerational transmission of religiosity, focusing on divorce-related disruptions in (a) spiritual modeling and (b) spiritual capital, as well as several other possible explanations for the apparent effects of divorce, such as selectivity.

## THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL BACKGROUND

A number of studies over the years have estimated that young adults' religious involvement and commitment are strongly influenced by parental and family socialization. Specifically, researchers have documented strong apparent effects of mothers' and fathers' religious affiliation, practice, and belief on the religiosity of young adults (Hoge et al. 1982; Cornwall 1989; Erickson 1992). Other studies have used earlier religious participation (e.g., during childhood and adolescence) as a proxy for family religious socialization (Stolzenberg et al. 1995). The available evidence suggests that parental religious socialization may affect the religiosity of offspring directly, via communication of explicit religious messages and teaching of religious routines and practices, as well as indirectly, through the channeling of youth activities and the selection of friendships (Cornwall 1987, 1989).

There are some disagreements in the literature regarding which aspects of young adults' religious involvement are most clearly influenced by family socialization. While some studies report that parental effects are strongest vis-à-vis private and subjective dimensions of religiosity (e.g., Cornwall 1989), others also estimate substantial family influences on organizational facets, such as church membership and religious attendance in adulthood (e.g., Stolzenberg et al. 1995).

However, not all families are equally successful at transmitting religious ties, practices, and beliefs across generations. On the contrary, these socialization patterns may be complicated by several factors. For example, investigators have explored gender-specific patterns of parental influence on the religiosity of adolescents and young adults, with discrepant findings. Some studies find that mothers are apparently more influential on the average than fathers in transmitting religion to their offspring (Acock and Bengtson 1978; Dudley and Dudley 1986; Bao et al. 1999). On the other hand, several researchers argue that these patterns vary depending on the specific dimension of religion under consideration; while mothers are more likely to shape the general religious orientations of children, fathers may have greater influence over their religious activities, such as religious membership and attendance (Kieren and Munro 1987; Clark, et al. 1988). In addition, several studies show that the intergenerational transmission of faith commitments is more likely when parents are perceived as competent (Whitbeck et al. 1989), and when the parent-child relationship is characterized by warmth, support, and emotional closeness (Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Bao et al. 1999).

Despite the convincing evidence that religion is often transmitted across generations, the mechanisms and pathways underlying this empirical relationship remain unclear. Two related, yet conceptually distinct, perspectives have been proposed by psychologist Pamela King and her colleagues (King and Muller 2004; King et al. 2002): the spiritual modeling (SM) and spiritual capital (SC) approaches. Briefly, the SM perspective is premised upon the view that young people grow and develop spiritually by imitating the life or conduct of spiritual exemplar(s). In general, such exemplars are often parents or other family members, but they may also be community members, church leaders, civic figures, or even key individuals from historical or religious texts. According to the SM approach, young people may learn spiritually relevant skills or behaviors by observing other persons whom they admire. Thus, spiritual exemplars are role models; through them, as King and Mueller (2004) point out, religious or spiritual behaviors can be modeled and then eventually learned.

The SC approach also underscores the potential importance of parental influence on the religiosity of offspring. However, whereas SM emphasizes the role of observational learning from spiritual role model(s), the SC perspective highlights the significance of direct spiritual interactions in the socialization process. Key to this approach is the emphasis on active religious training and sharing of spiritual insights, e.g., talking about religious issues, praying together,

encouraging offspring to follow a particular religious or spiritual path, and so on. At least one study of parental influence on adolescent religiousness finds empirical support for both the SM and SC perspectives (King and Mueller 2003).

## THE PRESENT STUDY

As we noted earlier, the possible influence of parental divorce on the religious participation and experiences of offspring—adolescents or young adults—has rarely been examined systematically. However, a few studies do conclude that offspring who are raised by both biological parents, as opposed to those raised in single-parent households or stepfamilies, are more likely to adopt their parents' religious practices and convictions (Myers 1996; Regnerus et al. 2004). In perhaps the most thorough study of the religious effects of parental divorce, Lawton and Bures (2001) analyze longitudinal data from the National Survey of Families and Households to explore whether parental divorce increases the likelihood of denominational switching and apostasy. They find considerable support for this hypothesis, particularly for those persons (a) who experience parental divorce in childhood, rather than adulthood, and (b) who were raised Catholic. Although their work is a notable contribution to the field, their analysis focuses only on religious affiliation, and not on organizational, non-organizational, or subjective religiosity, and their study stops short of providing a clear explanation for the observed patterns.

Although the SM and SC approaches have been used primarily to explain variations in the successful intergenerational transmission of religiousness between parents and offspring, the logic of each perspective may also offer clues regarding the potential role of parental divorce in disrupting this transmission. First, divorce is often sad and disturbing, and can be overtly unpleasant and ugly. For children who experience parental divorce and its aftermath, especially at a relatively early age, it may be difficult to sustain a sense of admiration for one's parents, or to maintain one's confidence in their ability to impart life lessons or spiritual wisdom. On the contrary, children may lose respect for the integrity and moral certitude of their parents and may not wish (or be able) to follow their guidance in the religious arena. Embittered divorced parents may exacerbate this problem by openly criticizing their ex-spouses, contributing to feelings of frustration and confusion on the part of their children. Thus, the SM process—at least insofar as it involves parents as spiritual exemplars—may be fundamentally disrupted by divorce.

Second, the experience of divorce may reduce sustained exposure to (at least) one parent. Custodial arrangements often privilege the mother, and so in practice the strength of the connection between father and child may be compromised as a result. In addition to the physical distance brought about by the

father's relocation (Amato and Gilbreth 1999; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994), researchers have identified several factors that prevent many divorced fathers from maintaining a close relationship with their children. For example, persistent conflicts with ex-wives might block fathers from having regular access to their children, and difficult negotiation may be needed in order to secure visitation time (Shapiro and Lambert 1999). Divorced fathers may remarry and form new blended families, thus requiring them to divide their energy and resources between the new family and their non-resident children (Manning et al 2003). Moreover, studies have found that divorced fathers report feelings of guilt and lack of control over their children's lives (Amato 2000). Thus, they may use their limited visitation time to focus on emotional bonding and "catching up" with their child(ren), rather than on providing discipline or guidance (Amato and Gilbreth 1999; Shapiro and Lambert 1999). Taken together, although they do not address the issue directly, recent studies of the effects of divorce on father-child relationships clearly raise the possibility that the role of fathers in religious socialization of their children may be disrupted following divorce.

Of course, the involvement of mothers in religious socialization may also be curtailed in the aftermath of divorce, for a number of reasons. Indeed, each parent may become more distant from religious or spiritual pursuits, and perhaps especially from institutional religion. This may stem from feelings of personal alienation due to perceived stigmatization of divorce, which is discouraged by most mainstream religious traditions. Newly-divorced persons may also encounter a lack of empathy or social receptivity on the part of congregation members, and many faith communities may lack appropriate ministry or outreach to divorced persons. In addition, divorced persons—perhaps especially women—may have other important goals in the aftermath of divorce. For example, mothers may be coping with financial hardship or rebuilding their emotional and social lives as divorced women. Under these circumstances, many divorced mothers may relegate religious conversations, practices, and instruction to a lower priority.

Our discussion to this point suggests the following hypotheses:

- H1: Young adult offspring of divorce will attend religious services less often, pray less often, and feel less closeness with God, on average, than young adults whose parents did not divorce.
- H2a: The offspring of divorce will report having less respect for their parents' morality and being more likely to doubt the sincerity of parents' religiosity than their counterparts from intact families.
- H2b: The link between parental divorce and the religiousness of offspring will be reduced or eliminated with controls for young adults' respect for parental morality and doubt about parental spirituality (the disrupted SM hypothesis).

- H3a: The offspring of divorce will report that their parents—particularly their fathers—were less involved in their religious socialization, as compared with young adults from intact families.
- H3b: The link between parental divorce and the religiousness of offspring will be reduced or eliminated with controls for direct parental involvement in young adults' religious socialization (the disrupted SC hypothesis).

Of course, there are other potential reasons besides deficits in SM or SC for any observed association between parental divorce and lower levels of religiousness among young adults. For example, it is possible that parents who were less religious, and who therefore may have been less interested or successful in providing SM or SC, were more prone to divorce (e.g., Call and Heaton 1997). Thus, it is important to control for religiousness during upbringing in order to rule out this potential confounding relationship. In addition, studies have shown that young adults who are stably married and who have children tend to be more religiously active, and especially to attend religious services more often than others (Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Stolzenberg et al 1995; Myers 1996). To the extent that experiences of parental divorce may undermine the likelihood and/or stability of marriages among young adults (e.g., Kobrin and Waite 1984; Glenn and Kramer 1987), this could also confound any association between parental divorce and the religiousness of offspring. Thus, it is also important to control for the relationship status of young adults, as well as the presence of children in the home.

## DATA

The data for this study come from the National Survey on the Moral and Spiritual Lives of Young Adults from Divorced and Intact Families (NSMS), which was conducted by the survey firm of Schulman, Ronca, and Bucuvalas, Inc. for the Institute for American Values in New York City.<sup>1</sup> NSMS is a nationally representative sample of 1,506 young adults from 18 to 35 years old, 751 from divorced families and 755 from intact families. The overall response rate for the survey was XX%. None of the respondents had experienced the death of a parent before they were 18 years old, nor were any of them adopted. Participants from intact families had two biological parents who married before the respondent was born, stayed married, and were still married at the time of the survey unless one

---

<sup>1</sup>Two of the co-authors of this paper are key investigators for the NSMS: Elizabeth Marquardt and Norval Glenn. The project was funded by the Lilly Endowment Inc. For further information, please visit <http://www.betweentwoworlds.org>.

or both had died. Respondents who are from divorced families had experienced parental divorce before they were 15 years old and, after the divorce, continued to maintain contact with each parent; those study participants were required to have seen both parents a minimum of once a year in the years following the divorce.

## MEASURES

### *Dependent Variables*

*Current religious involvement.* Three dimensions of current personal religiosity are examined: frequency of service attendance, frequency of prayer, and feelings of closeness to God. *Religious service attendance* is a widely used measure to indicate a respondent's religious involvement, especially the public aspects of religiosity. It is coded such that higher values indicate more frequent attendance. Respondents were asked the following question: "Aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services?" The response categories constituted a 4-point scale ranging from (1) "Never or almost never" to (4) "Almost every week." We also use two items to reflect the private aspects of a respondent's religious involvement spirituality: frequency of prayer and closeness to God. *Frequency of prayer* is measured by responses to the following question: "In your life now, which of the following best describes your practice of prayer?" The response categories ranged from (1) "I never pray" to (4) "Prayer is a regular part of my life."

*Closeness to God.* In order to gauge the respondent's subjective religious life, we use answers to a unique series of questions regarding perception of closeness to God. The measure is calculated as the average of five items: (a) "I sometimes feel the presence of God"; (b) "I feel like a member of God's family"; (c) "When I have needed help God has been there for me"; (d) "Because there is so much suffering in the world I find it hard to believe in God"; and (e) "When I think about bad things that have happened in my life I find it hard to believe in a God who cares." Responses to each item were given on a four point scale, ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." In order to keep the consistency of coding, all items are coded such that higher scores indicate perceptions of a closer relationship with God. Our measure of closeness to God, then, is the average response to these five items. The reliability coefficient ( $\alpha$ ) for this measure is .83.

### *Parental Divorce*

A dummy variable is used to identify respondents who were offspring of divorce. If a respondent's parents were divorced before they turned 15, the dummy variable is coded as 1; if a respondent was from an intact family, the variable is coded as 0.

### **Key Mediating Variables**

*Religious socialization by mother and father.* The detailed information from the NSMS allows us to create a three-item scale to measure the level of religious engagement and participation of each parent in their child's religious lives, in order to test our hypotheses regarding the role of spiritual capital (SC). The measures are based on levels of (dis)agreement with the following statements: (a) "My mother/father encouraged me to practice a religious faith"; (b) "My mother/father taught me how to pray"; and (c) "I often prayed with my mother/father." Response categories ranged from (1) "strongly disagree" to (4) "strongly agree," such that higher scores indicate higher levels of parental involvement. The religious socialization variables are calculated as the average of these three items. The  $\alpha$  coefficient for the mother's religious socialization scale is .84;  $\alpha$  for the father's scale is .87. Because the correlation between religious socialization by the mother and father is strong (.54,  $p < .001$ ), we enter these variables individually into our models to avoid the problem of collinearity.

Respondents from intact families were asked to answer these items based on their accumulative childhood experiences, beginning with their earliest childhood memories and ending when they turn 18 years old. Offspring of divorce were asked to respond based on their experiences for the period following parental divorce and ending with their 18th birthday. The other potential mediating variables addressing the spiritual modeling (SM) hypotheses, detailed below, follow the same pattern.

*Beliefs about mother's and father's morality.* To examine the role of SM, we generate a three-item index assessing respondents' beliefs about each parent's morality based on levels of (dis)agreement with the following statements: (a) "My mother/father and I share similar moral values"; (b) "My mother/father is a good person"; and (c) "My mother/father taught me clearly the difference between right and wrong." Each item is coded from 1 to 4, with higher scores denoting greater agreement with the statement. Our measure for each parent is the average score on these items. The coefficient of reliability test is  $\alpha = .78$  for beliefs about mother's morality and  $\alpha = .82$  for beliefs about father's morality.

*Beliefs about the sincerity of parent's religion.* In a further attempt to tap SM, we also measure respondents' assessments of the sincerity of each parent's religious faith, based on (dis)agreement with the following statement: "I doubt the sincerity of my mother's/father's religious beliefs." In order to maintain the consistency with other variables, we code the item with the higher score indicating stronger faith in parents, such that "strongly agree" = 1 while "strongly disagree" = 4.

### **Background Variables**

*Childhood religious involvement.* As previous research consistently shows that childhood religiosity is strongly associated with adulthood religiosity, we use three measures of religion during upbringing period. First, the religious traditions in which respondents were raised are grouped into five categories: evangelical



Protestant (15.76%), mainline Protestant (29.60%), Catholic (28.87%), other religious traditions (8.4%), and raised without religious affiliation or as Atheist (12.05%).<sup>2</sup> Secondly, respondents were asked the following question to indicate the frequency of their childhood service attendance: "Thinking about the period in your childhood when you attended religious services most often, how often did you attend?" Response categories for this question ranged from (1) almost never to (4) every week/almost every week. Third, we also measure respondent's childhood prayer life using responses to the following item: "Thinking about the period in your childhood when you prayed most often, how often did you pray?" Response categories for this question range from (1) hardly ever to (4) every day. Both offspring of divorce and offspring of intact families were asked these questions.

*Other covariates.* Numerous studies have shown that demographic characteristics are significant correlates of religious participation. Thus, in accordance with previous studies, we control for each respondent's age (measured in years), gender (1=male, 0=female), race (1=white, 0=non-white), region (1=South, 0=other), and education (measured in years). As discussed earlier, we are aware that current religious activities might be influenced by respondents' current marital status, as scholars consistently show that married people with children attend religious services more often than other persons. Therefore in this study we control for the effects of marriage and family on current religious behaviors. *Current marital status* is measured as four mutually exclusive categories: currently married, single/never married, divorced or separated, and currently cohabit. The "currently married" group is the reference group in this study. *Parental Status* is a dummy variable. Respondents were asked "Do you have children or stepchildren now?" If the response was yes, the variable is coded as 1; a response of no is coded as 0.

### **Analytic Strategy**

Our analytic strategy involves three steps. In Table 1, we provide information on the means and standard deviations for all variables used in our analyses, along with tests of mean differences between our two subsamples, offspring of divorce and offspring from intact families. In Table 2, we estimate ordered logistic regression models, estimating the net effects of parental divorce and other covariates on three indicators of religious involvement in young adulthood. Finally, in Table 3, we add the key explanatory variables—those measuring aspects of spiritual capital (SC) and spiritual modeling (SM)—into the models estimated in Table

---

<sup>2</sup>The classification of evangelical Protestant and mainline Protestant denominations follows the scheme proposed by Steensland et al. (2000). In one departure from their approach, however, African Americans are not clustered into a separate religious category, but instead are included in the evangelical and mainline Protestant groupings. In our statistical models, evangelical Protestant constitutes the reference group (omitted category). Groups classified as "other" religious traditions include Christian Science, Jehovah's Witness, Mormon, Orthodox, and various non-Christian religions (e.g. Jewish, Muslim, etc.).

**TABLE 1**  
Means and Standard Deviations (in Parentheses) for Study Variables

	Total Sample	Offspring of Divorce	Offspring from Intact Families	T-Test
<i>Dependent Variables</i>				
Current attendance	2.53 (1.17)	2.35 (1.15)	2.69 (1.16)	***
Closeness to God	3.37 (.75)	3.33 (.77)	3.40 (.73)	
Current prayer life	3.18 (1.02)	3.14 (1.03)	3.21 (1.01)	+
<i>Sociodemographic Variables</i>				
Age	28.76 (4.60)	28.66 (4.07)	28.85 (4.71)	
Male	.42 (.49)	.40 (.49)	.43 (.50)	+
White	.88 (.32)	.88 (.32)	.87 (.32)	
South	.35 (.48)	.38 (.48)	.33 (.47)	*
Education	5.01 (1.42)	4.87 (1.43)	5.19 (1.40)	***
<i>Childhood Religion Variables</i>				
Raised evangelical Protestant	.16 (.36)	.16 (.37)	.15 (.35)	
Raised mainline Protestant	.30 (.45)	.30 (.46)	.30 (.45)	
Raised Catholic	.29 (.45)	.26 (.44)	.32 (.46)	**
Raised other religion	.08 (.28)	.06 (.25)	.10 (.30)	*
Raised no religion	.11 (.31)	.13 (.33)	.09 (.28)	**
Childhood attendance	3.17 (1.13)	2.99 (1.16)	3.34 (1.05)	***
Childhood prayer	3.02 (1.14)	2.91 (1.17)	3.12 (1.10)	***
<i>Current Family Status Variables</i>				
Current married	.61 (.49)	.58 (.44)	.63 (.48)	+
Currently single	.27 (.45)	.26 (.49)	.29 (.46)	
Currently divorced or separated	.06 (.25)	.08 (.28)	.03 (.20)	***
Currently cohabit	.06 (.25)	.07 (.27)	.04 (.21)	**
Parental Status	.58 (.49)	.61 (.49)	.54 (.50)	**

**TABLE 1 continued**  
Means and Standard Deviations (in Parentheses) for Study Variables

	Total Sample	Offspring of Divorce	Offspring from Intact Families	T-Test
<i>Key Explanatory Variables</i>				
Religious socialization from mother	2.59 (1.04)	2.24 (1.02)	2.87 (.97)	***
Religious socialization from father	2.08 (1.04)	1.68 (.88)	2.46 (1.04)	***
Beliefs about mother's morality	3.68 (.54)	3.53 (.65)	3.81 (.34)	***
Beliefs about father's morality	3.54 (.67)	3.28 (.78)	3.79 (.38)	***
Beliefs about sincerity of mother's religion	1.49 (.85)	1.35 (.95)	1.65 (.69)	***
Beliefs about sincerity of father's religion	1.69 (.98)	1.47 (1.08)	1.92 (.82)	***

+ =  $p < .10$     \*\* =  $p < .05$     \*\*\* =  $p < .01$     \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

2. To conserve space, only odds ratios for the predictors of central theoretical interest are reported in Table 3. In order to avoid the problem of collinearity, we add each indicator of SC and SM separately. After listwise deletion of the cases with missing values, our effective sample size is 1,392 (709 respondents from intact families, and 683 respondents who are offspring of divorce).

## RESULTS

Table 1 displays means and standard deviations for all variables used in this study, as well as comparisons between the two subsamples, offspring of divorce and respondents from intact families. With regard to the dependent variables, we find mixed initial support for H1. The offspring of divorce report significantly lower levels of adult religious attendance than their counterparts from intact families ( $p < .001$ ), and there is also a modest difference in adult prayer activity ( $p < .10$ ). By contrast, there is no meaningful difference between these two subsamples in average feelings of closeness to God. Consistent with our expectations (H2a), we find that the offspring of divorce express less admiration for the morality and the spirituality of their parents than do their counterparts from intact families. And as anticipated (H3a), the offspring of divorce also report lower levels of religious socialization by both parents, but particularly by fathers, as compared with persons raised in intact families.

A number of patterns involving covariates also merit brief mention. Children of divorce are significantly less likely to have been raised Catholic, and more likely to have been raised without religion, than children from intact families. In addition, the offspring of divorced parents also report lower levels of childhood attendance at religious services and childhood prayer. Children of divorce are more likely to be divorced or separated, and more likely to be cohabiting, than persons raised in intact families, although they are slightly more prone to have children in the household. And consistent with some previous studies, respondents from intact families have higher average levels of educational attainment than the offspring of divorce.

**TABLE 2**  
Odds Ratios from Ordered Logistic Regression Models  
Predicting Adult Religious Outcomes (n=1,392)

	Current Attendance	Closeness to God	Current Prayer Life
Parental divorce	.659***	.962	1.029
<i>Sociodemographic Variables</i>			
Age	.998	1.040**	1.004
Male	.707**	.529***	.433***
White	1.244	.987	.913
South	1.380**	1.751***	1.553***
Education	1.036	.957	1.036
<i>Childhood Religion Variables</i>			
Raised mainline Protestant	.896	.925	.991
Raised Catholic	.670**	.559***	.785
Raised other religion	.570**	.611*	.864
Raised no religion	.570*	.635*	.602*
Childhood attendance	1.573***	1.473***	1.334***
Childhood prayer	1.299***	1.580***	1.851***
<i>Adult Family Status Variables</i>			
Single	.645**	.713*	.674*
Divorced or separated	.657*	.562**	.888
Cohabit	.458***	.465***	.352***
Parental Status	1.340*	1.365*	1.361*
<i>Model Fit Statistics</i>			
-2 log likelihood	3420.66	5760.40	2748.40
Pseudo R-squared	.097	.080	.150

\* =  $p < .05$     \*\* =  $p < .01$     \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Table 2 presents the results of ordered logistic regression models, estimating the net effects of parental divorce and control variables on our three measures of adult religious involvement. The cell entries in Table 2 are cumulative odds

ratios (see Powers and Xie 2000). The results again reveal mixed support for H1. According to these estimates, the offspring of divorce attend religious services less often in adulthood ( $OR=.659$ ,  $p<.001$ ), even with adjustments for religious upbringing, marital and family status, and sociodemographic factors. On the other hand, there are no significant differences between children of divorce and those from intact families on adult prayer life or feelings of closeness to God in these models.

Although ordered logistic regression is the appropriate technique in situations like this one, the estimated net effects—expressed as odds ratios—may be somewhat less intuitively clear in their interpretation than those derived from ordinary least squares regression, or even binary logistic regression, models. This estimated net effect means that the odds of the response on the dependent variable being greater than or equal to a particular category on the 1-4 continuum for frequency of religious attendance (as opposed to a response at a lower category) are approximately 34% ( $1-.659=.341$ ) lower for persons whose parents divorced prior to age 15 than for those from intact families.<sup>3</sup>

Not surprisingly, adult religious involvement is strongly predicted by childhood attendance and childhood prayer; in addition, levels of each adult religious indicator are markedly lower among persons raised Catholic, in other religions, or with no religion, as compared with those raised in Evangelical Protestant families. Compared with married respondents, levels of each type of adult religious involvement are much lower among cohabiting and never-married persons, and closeness to God is also lower among divorced and separated respondents, compared with those who were married at the time of the interview. Finally, each of the three aspects of adult religiosity is higher among females than males, and among residents of the South than individuals in other areas of the United States.

In Table 3 we explore the role of variations in spiritual modeling (SM) and spiritual capital (SC) in explaining the lower levels of adult religious attendance among offspring of divorce. In models 1 and 2, the measures of spiritual capital—religious socialization by mother and by father—are positively associated with respondent reports of church attendance in adulthood. Moreover, in partial support of H3b, the inclusion of religious socialization on the part of the father

---

<sup>3</sup>An anonymous reviewer raised the interesting possibility that parental divorce may incline offspring (a) to abandon organized religion altogether or, conversely, (b) to gravitate toward groups that offer particularly strong or intense religious experiences and communities (e.g., those afforded by evangelical Protestantism). Although a detailed multivariate analysis of this possibility lies beyond the scope of this article, descriptive findings offer only mixed support. On the one hand, offspring of divorce are somewhat *more* likely to report attending services rarely or never (29.9% vs. 21.3%,  $p<.001$ ); they are also less likely to attend services regularly (24.2% vs. 35.4%,  $p<.001$ ). On the other hand, with regard to evangelical leanings, offspring of divorce are somewhat *less* likely to belong to evangelical Protestant groups (17.3% vs. 21.1%,  $p<.05$ ), and no more likely to report having a “born again” or life-changing religious experience (25.5% vs. 27.6%,  $p=.191$ ).

**TABLE 3**  
Odds Ratios of Primary Explanatory Variables from Ordered Logistic  
Regressions Predicting Current Religious Attendance (n=1,392)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Parental divorce	.756**	.857	.691***	.698***	.650***	.670***
Religious socialization from mother	1.430***					
Religious socialization from father		1.519***				
Beliefs about mother's morality			1.280*			
Beliefs about father's morality				1.146+		
Beliefs about sincerity of mother's religion					1.054	
Beliefs about sincerity of father's religion						.960
<i>Change in net effects of parental divorce (%)</i>	-14.7	-30.0	-4.9	-5.9	1.4	-1.7
$\Delta$ of -2 log likelihood (df)	32.8*** (1)	54.92** (1)	5.84* (1)	2.88+ (1)	68.58*** (1)	35.18*** (1)

Note: Each model controls for respondent's age, sex, race, region, education, current marital status, and parental status.

+ =  $p < .10$    \* =  $p < .05$    \*\* =  $p < .01$    \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

reduces the estimated net effect of parental divorce by 30%, rendering it statistically insignificant. This suggests that this aspect of SC lies at the root of the attendance differential between our two subsamples. By contrast, H2b finds no support in our models. Although beliefs about maternal and paternal morality are significantly related to the attendance of offspring in models 3 and 4, the addition of these controls does not attenuate the estimated effect of parental divorce. In models 5 and 6, we find that beliefs about the sincerity of parents' religious beliefs are unrelated to young adults' self-reported religious attendance, and thus—contrary to H2b—do not mediate the estimated effects of parental divorce.

In ancillary models (not shown), we examined three other possible explanations for the links between parental divorce and religious attendance among young adults. First, we included adjustments for the age of offspring at the time of parental divorce. However, the median age of children when parents divorced was quite young—approximately 7 years of age—meaning that most offspring of divorce experienced the bulk of their religious socialization during the period after their parents split. Incorporating this information into our models did not alter the main conclusion reported here. Second, we explored the possibility that lower levels of organizational religious involvement among offspring of divorce may stem from alienation caused by the failure of clergy or other church members to reach out during or immediately following the divorce. However, only a minority (approximately one-fourth) of respondents whose parents divorced prior to age 15 recalled that clergy or other congregation members reached out to them, and controlling for this variable did not affect our main findings. Finally, to supplement the analyses in Table 3, we explored two gender-specific hypotheses: (a) that the mother's role in spiritual capital and/or spiritual modeling would be more important than the father's role, on average, for all offspring; and alternatively, (b) that mother's SC and/or SM would have a stronger effect on female offspring, while father's SC and/or SM would have a stronger effect on male offspring. Neither of these hypotheses found clear support in models of young adults' religious attendance, further bolstering our confidence in the findings presented in Table 3.

## DISCUSSION

As we noted at the outset of this paper, the relationships between parental divorce and the spiritual lives of young adults have been virtually ignored by social scientists. Our study has addressed this significant gap in the literature, using data from a unique, recent, nationwide sample of young adults. Two major findings emerge from this investigation. First, the offspring of divorced parents report substantially lower average levels of religious attendance in adulthood compared with young adults raised in intact families, even with statistical controls for a host of potentially confounding factors, such as multiple measures of childhood religious engagement and adult relationship status. However, there is no evidence that parental divorce depresses non-organizational religious involvement (e.g., prayer life) or subjective religiousness (e.g., feelings of closeness to God) in adulthood. Second, upon testing hypotheses drawn from two competing perspectives (SM and SC), we find a clear explanation for the link between parental divorce and low adult religious attendance: Divorced fathers are much less engaged in religious socialization of their offspring than fathers in intact families. Although divorced mothers are also less proactive in religious training, it is

the distinctive role of fathers that appears to account for the gap in self-reported attendance among young adults.

How and why might parental divorce have such a negative impact on the organizational religious participation of young adult offspring? Several dynamics may underlie this pattern. First, custody arrangements have typically favored mothers, who are traditionally presumed to offer more caring, stable environments for children than fathers. Even joint custodial arrangements can limit the role of fathers in the daily or weekly lives of their children. Periodic visits are often devoted to rebuilding the father-child relationship or to engaging in bonding or leisure activities, perhaps at the expense of religious or spiritual socialization. Second, parental divorce may also diminish family interest and participation in religious congregations, in part because at least some parents may perceive judgmentalism, coolness, or ostracism on the part of church members. Religious disengagement following divorce may be more pronounced among men, who tend to be less attached to religious organizations than their spouses, and some of whom may attend services mainly to set an example and encourage the moral training of the children (Sandomirsky and Wilson 1990; Sherkat and Wilson 1995; Stolzenberg et al. 1995). Further, parental divorce may also disrupt the contacts between offspring and relatives on one side of the extended family, e.g., paternal grandparents, aunts and uncles, and so on, which could otherwise reinforce religious training and commitment. Third, another contributing factor to the link between parental divorce and religious disengagement may be the inadequacy of ministries to non-traditional (i.e., non-nuclear) families, including divorced persons and their offspring, among others (Wilcox et al. 2004). Distinguishing carefully among these mechanisms should be an important priority for future studies.

Based on these findings, we can add young adults' organizational religious involvement to the substantial list of outcomes that apparently are affected by parental divorce. At the same time, however, parental divorce bears little relationship to the non-organizational or subjective facets of children's spiritual lives. Although the data do not permit a thorough investigation of the reasons for these null findings, at least two types of speculative explanations occur to us. First, organizational religious allegiance and participation in adulthood depend heavily on processes of family socialization in childhood and adolescence (e.g., Cornwall 1989). This is precisely the kind of formal activity that is most likely to be affected by disruptions in family socialization and interaction. By contrast, although personal devotion and experiences of the transcendent are also influenced by social factors, there is at least some evidence that they are less dependent upon formal lessons acquired within one's family of origin, and may be more amenable to influences from media and culture, personality, individual circumstances, and even biosocial (e.g., genetic) predispositions (e.g., Kendler, et al. 1997; D'Onofrio et al. 1999). Thus, it makes sense that private and subjective



domains of religiousness and spirituality might be less directly affected by the legacy of parental divorce.

Second, the lack of an association between parental divorce and non-organizational aspects of young adults' religious and spiritual lives may reflect two offsetting patterns of influence. On the one hand, for some persons the experience of parental divorce may indeed undermine private, as well as institutional, religious engagements. For others, however, the feelings of distress and alienation that follow in the aftermath of parental divorce may spur greater spiritual engagement, leading some persons to seek a closer personal relationship with God, through prayer and/or other devotional practices. Thus, it is conceivable that these two competing patterns may account for the null overall association between parental divorce and frequency of prayer or feelings of closeness to God in young adulthood. Although such hypotheses are plausible, they are speculative at this point, and further research is needed to investigate these, and perhaps other, possibilities.

Divorce rates have plateaued after reaching their high-water mark in the early-to mid-1980s, and over time this may help to stem the patterns observed here, making it easier for families to pass on their organizational loyalties (if any) to their offspring. At the same time, the phenomena reflected in the findings reported here may have contributed to some of the recent trends in the American religious and spiritual landscape, including the emergence of a segment of the cultural marketplace characterized as "spiritual, but not religious" (Roof 1999; Marler and Hadaway 2002). The possible role of parental divorce in the crystallization or expansion of this base of identity certainly deserves further research.

Our findings underscore the importance of paternal religious roles within families, and they contribute to a broader literature on the nexus of religion and fatherhood. For example, several studies have shown that religious involvement—especially regular attendance at religious services—is associated with greater paternal engagement in the lives of children and adolescents, including greater investments of time, as well as more monitoring, support, and discipline (Bartkowski and Xu 2000; Wilcox 2002). At least one study indicates that religious involvement promotes closer overall father-child relationships (King 2003). This, in turn, dovetails with a growing appreciation of the unique contribution made by fathers to the social and emotional development of their offspring in adolescence and young adulthood (Videon 2005). Now it appears that fathers are critically and uniquely important in shaping the organizational religious activities of their offspring as well.

Although this study contributes to the literature in several areas, it also has several limitations. First and foremost, these data are cross-sectional. Given the temporal ordering of key variables, and our efforts to rule out competing explanations, we believe it is reasonable to infer cautiously the causal direction of the relationships between parental divorce and young adults' religiousness. However,

more definitive evidence of the nature of this association requires longitudinal data. Several other data limitations also deserve brief attention. Information on religious upbringing and young adults' assessments of parent-child relationships and parental behaviors were gathered retrospectively. In addition, survey items on childhood religiousness are framed in general terms, and not in reference to specific ages or to the timing of parental divorce or other changes or transitions. In a similar vein, the measure of childhood religious socialization—both spiritual capital and spiritual modeling constructs—suffers from notable limitations as well. Since the offspring from intact families were asked to recall accumulated socialization experiences (from early childhood until their 18th birthday), whereas offspring of divorce report on these experiences only between the time of divorce and their 18th birthday, it is possible that levels and effects of parental socialization may be overestimated for offspring from intact families. This potential pitfall may be exacerbated by the tendency for parental involvement of all kinds to diminish as children age into adolescence, regardless of family structure. Thus, future studies on this topic would benefit from more precise data on the timing of religious socialization, divorce, relocation, and the formation of blended families. It would also be desirable to have more detailed information about each parent's religious involvement and the nature and timing of any changes therein.

Despite these limitations, we believe this study has broken new ground by casting fresh light on the relationships between parental divorce and multiple dimensions of religious involvement among young adults, and also by exploring several potential explanations for the observed associations. Over the past two decades, we have witnessed a resurgence of scholarly interest in the complex connections between the social institutions of religion and family. Closer attention to the spiritual consequences of relationship conflict and divorce, within and across generations, promises to enrich our understanding of this vital but neglected area in the 21st century.

## REFERENCES

- Acock, Alan C., and Vern L. Bengtson. 1978. "On the Relative Influence of Mothers and Fathers: A Covariance Analysis of Political and Religious Socialization." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 40:519-30.
- Amato, Paul R. 2000. "The Consequences of Divorce for Adults and Children." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62:1269-87.
- Amato, Paul R., and Alan W. Booth. 1997. *A Generation at Risk*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Amato, Paul R., and Joan G. Gilbreth. 1999. "Nonresident Fathers and Children's Well-Being: A Meta-Analysis." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61:557-73.
- Astone, Nan L., and Sara McLanahan. 1991. "Family Structure, Parental Practices, and High School Completion." *American Sociological Review* 56:309-20.

- Bao, Wan-Ning, Les B. Whitbeck, Danny R. Hoyt, and Rand D. Conger. 1999. "Perceived Parental Acceptance as a Moderator of Religious Transmission among Adolescent Boys and Girls." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61:362-74.
- Bartkowski, John P., and Xiaohe Xu. 2000. "Distant Patriarchs or Expressive Dads? The Discourse and Practice of Fathering in Conservative Protestant Families." *Sociological Quarterly* 41:465-86.
- Biblarz, Timothy, and Adrian Raftery. 1993. "The Effects of Family Disruption on Social Mobility." *American Sociological Review* 58:97-109.
- Call, Vaughn R.A., and Tim B. Heaton. 1997. "Religious Influence on Marital Stability." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36:382-92.
- Cherlin, Andrew J. 1992. *Marriage, Divorce, Remarriage*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Clark, Cynthia A., Everett L. Worthington, and Donald B. Danser. 1988. "Transmission of Religious Beliefs and Practices from Parents to Firstborn Early Adolescent Sons." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 50:463-72.
- Cornwall, Marie. 1987. "The Social Bases of Religion: A Study of Factors Influencing Religious Belief and Commitment." *Review of Religious Research* 29:44-56.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1989. "The Determinants of Religious Behavior: A Theoretical Model and Empirical Test." *Social Forces* 68:572-92.
- D'Onofrio, Brian M., Lindon J. Eaves, Lenn Murrelle, Hermine H. Maes, and Bernard Spilka. 1999. "Understanding Biological and Social Influences on Religious Affiliation, Attitudes and Behaviors: A Behavior Genetic Perspective." *Journal of Personality* 67:953-84.
- Dudley, Roger L., and Margaret G. Dudley. 1986. "Transmission of Religious Values from Parents to Adolescents." *Review of Religious Research* 28:3-15.
- Erickson, Joseph P. 1992. "Adolescent Religious Development and Commitment: A Structural Equation Model of the Role of the Family, Peer Group, and Educational Influences." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 31:131-52.
- Glenn, Norval D., and Kathryn Kramer. 1987. "The Marriages and Divorces of the Children of Divorce." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 49:811-25.
- Heaton, Tim B. 2002. "Factors Contributing to Increasing Marital Stability in the United States." *Journal of Family Issues* 23:392-409.
- Hoge, Dean R., Greg H. Petrillo, and Ella I. Smith. 1982. "Transmission of Religious and Social Values from Parents to Teenage Children." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 44:569-80.
- Kendler, Kenneth S., Charles O. Gardner, and Carol A. Prescott. 1997. "Religion, Psychopathology, and Substance Use and Abuse: A Multi-Measure, Genetic-Epidemiologic Study." *American Journal of Psychiatry* 154:322-29.
- Kieren, Dianne K., and Brenda Munro. 1987. "Following the Leader: Parents' Influence on Adolescent Religious Activities." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 26:249-55.
- King, Pamela Ebstyn, James L. Furrow, and Natalie Roth. 2002. "The Influence of Family and Peers on Adolescent Religiousness." *Journal for Psychology and Christianity* 21:109-20.
- King, Pamela Ebstyn, and Ross A. Mueller. 2004. "Parental Influence on Adolescent Religiousness: Exploring the Roles of Spiritual Modeling and Spiritual Capital." *Marriage and Family: A Christian Journal* 6:413-25.
- King, Valarie. 2003. "The Influence of Religion on Fathers' Relationships with Their Children." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 65:382-95.
- Kobrin, Frances E., and Linda J. Waite. 1984. "Effects of Childhood Family Structure on the Transition to Marriage." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 46:807-16.

- Lawton, Leora E., and Regina Bures. 2001. "Parental Divorce and the 'Switching' of Religious Identity." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 40:99-111.
- Manning, Wendy D., Susan D. Stewart, and Pamela J. Smock. 2003. "The Complexity of Fathers' Parenting Responsibilities and Involvement with Nonresident Children." *Journal of Family Issues* 24:645-67.
- Marler, Penny Long, and C. Kirk Hadaway. 2002. "Being Religious or Being Spiritual in America: A Zero-Sum Proposition?" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41:289-300.
- McLanahan, Sarah, and Larry Bumpass. 1988. "Intergenerational Consequences of Family Disruption." *American Journal of Sociology* 94:130-52.
- McLanahan, Sarah, and Gary Sandefur. 1994. *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Myers, Scott M. 1996. "An Interactive Model of Religiosity Inheritance: The Importance of Family Context." *American Sociological Review* 61:858-66.
- Powers, Daniel A. and Yu Xie. 2000. *Statistical Methods for Categorical Data Analysis*. San Diego: Academic Press.
- Regnerus, Mark D., Christian Smith, and Brad Smith. 2004. "Social Context in the Development of Adolescent Religiosity." *Applied Developmental Science* 8:27-38.
- Roof, Wade Clark. 1999. *Spiritual Marketplace*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Sandomirsky, Sharon, and John Wilson. 1990. "Processes of Disaffiliation: Religious Mobility among Men and Women." *Social Forces* 68:1211-29.
- Shapiro, Adam, and James David Lambert. 1999. "Longitudinal Effects of Divorce on the Quality of the Father-Child Relationship and on Fathers' Psychological Well-Being." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61:397-408.
- Sherkat, Darren E., and John Wilson. 1995. "Preferences, Constraints, and Choices in Religious Markets: An Examination of Religious Switching and Apostasy." *Social Forces* 73:993-1026.
- Steenland, Brian, Jerry Z. Park, Mark D. Regnerus, Lynn D. Robinson, W. Bradford Wilcox, and Robert D. Woodberry. 2000. "The Measure of American Religion: Toward Improving the State of the Art." *Social Forces* 79:291-318.
- Stolzenberg, Ross M., Mary Blair-Loy, and Linda J. Waite. 1995. "Religious Participation in Early Adulthood: Age and Family Life Cycle Effects on Church Membership." *American Sociological Review* 60:84-103.
- Videon, Tami M. 2005. "Parent-Child Relations and Children's Psychological Well-Being: Do Dads Matter?" *Journal of Family Issues* 26:55-78.
- Whitbeck, Les B., Ronald L. Simons, Rand D. Conger, and Frederick O. Lorenz. 1989. "Value Socialization and Peer Group Affiliation among Early Adolescents." *Journal of Early Adolescence* 9:436-53.
- Wilcox, W. Bradford. 2002. "Religion, Convention, and Paternal Involvement." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 64:780-92.
- Wilcox, W. Bradford, Mark Chaves, and David Franz. 2004. "Focused on the Family? Religious Traditions, Family Discourse, and Pastoral Practice." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43:491-504.



## COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: Parental Divorce and Religious Involvement among  
Young Adults

SOURCE: Sociol Relig 68 no2 Summ 2007

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited. To contact the publisher:  
<http://www.sociologyofreligion.com/>