



## Faculty Publications

---

2019

# Faith, Feminism, and Marriage: Institutions, Norms, and Relationship Quality

Jason S. Carroll

*Brigham Young University - Provo*, [jcarroll@byu.edu](mailto:jcarroll@byu.edu)

Spencer James

*Brigham Young University - Provo*

W. Bradford Wilcox

*Brigham Young University - Provo*

Richard Reeves

*The Brookings Institution*

Laurie DeRose

*Georgetown University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub>



Part of the [Other Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

---

### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Carroll, Jason S.; James, Spencer; Wilcox, W. Bradford; Reeves, Richard; and DeRose, Laurie, "Faith, Feminism, and Marriage: Institutions, Norms, and Relationship Quality" (2019). *Faculty Publications*. 4328. <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/4328>

This Report is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

## CHAPTER 2: FAITH, FEMINISM, AND MARRIAGE

*Institutions, Norms, and Relationship Quality*



## Chapter 2: Faith, Feminism, and Marriage

### Institutions, Norms, and Relationship Quality

Jason S. Carroll, *Brigham Young University*

Spencer James, *Brigham Young University*

W. Bradford Wilcox, *University of Virginia*

Richard Reeves, *Brookings Institution*

Laurie DeRose, *Georgetown University*

**Abstract:** *In this essay, we explore the links between religion and relationship quality for cohabiting and married couples. Our evidence from an 11-country sample suggests men and women in highly religious couples enjoy significantly higher levels of relationship quality and sexual satisfaction. Joint decision-making, however, is higher among men in shared secular relationships and women in highly religious relationships, compared to their peers in less/mixed religious couples. We also find a J-Curve in overall relationship quality for women such that women in shared secular, progressive relationships enjoy comparatively high levels of relationship quality, women in the ideological and religious middle report lower levels of relationship quality, and women in highly religious relationships, especially traditionalists, report the highest levels of relationship quality. Our results suggest that the association between gender ideology and relationship quality varies by religiosity.*

Across much of the developed world, marriage has been in retreat in recent decades. More adults are living on their own; others are choosing to cohabit, sometimes as a prelude to marriage, and sometimes as an alternative.<sup>1</sup>

“We are witnessing a shift to a new social model,” suggests the demographer Joel Kotkin, where “increasingly, family no longer serves as the central organizing feature of society.”<sup>2</sup> A growing share of adults are unpartnered in much of East Asia, Europe, the Americas, and Oceania—from Japan to the United States, from the United Kingdom to Chile.

In part, this has more to do with people marrying later rather than avoiding marriage altogether. It is important to note that most people, in the vast majority of countries across the world, still get married at some point in their lives. By age 40, almost eight out of 10 women in the United States, for example, have been married.<sup>3</sup> And while many men and women who marry will also divorce, the divorce rate has also stabilized, or even in some cases declined, in recent years in a number of countries around the world. The bottom line, then, is that even though marriage is in retreat, it still grounds and guides the lives of adult men and women across the globe.

### Marriage: Who Cares?

Why worry about marriage at all? If adults are choosing different paths through life that suit their own desires and preferences, then perhaps marriage can be seen as just one choice among many. Some do it, some don't. Some stick at it, others move on.

There are, nonetheless, three good reasons to pay attention to trends in marriage rates, solo living, and cohabitation. First, shifting family patterns can have profound economic consequences, fueling poverty, insecurity, and inequality. Single adults and especially single parents are at a much higher risk of poverty since they have similar costs to a married or cohabiting couple, but

<sup>1</sup> R. Lesthaeghe, “The Second Demographic Transition: A Concise Overview of Its Development,” *PNAS*, 111, no. 51 (2014): 18112-18115; E. Klinenberg, *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone* (New York: Penguin, 2013); B. De Paulo, *Singled Out: How Singles are Stereotyped, Stigmatized and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After* (New York: St Martins/Griffin, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> J. Kotkin et al., *The Rise of Post Familialism: Humanity's Future* (Singapore: Civil Service College, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> S. Martin et al., *Fewer Marriages, More Divergence: Marriage Projections for Millennials to Age 40* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2014).

only one breadwinner. Two adults can share costs, caring responsibilities, and earnings. Shifts in family structure have been an important driver of growing household income inequality in many countries.<sup>4</sup>

Second, committed adult relationships, typically expressed through and embedded in marriage, are strongly associated with a range of other social and economic outcomes, including employment, health, and happiness. There are selection effects here, of course. People who are happy are more likely to get married, for example. But marriage does seem to have a positive *causal* impact on some outcomes as well.<sup>5</sup> This may be one reason why marriage remains an important aspiration for most people across the globe.

Third, there is overwhelming evidence that children raised in stable families typically do much better in life, particularly in terms of education and employment.<sup>6</sup> Marriage certainly does not guarantee stability, given the risks of divorce today. Single parents, cohabiting couples, and grandparents can provide stability as well. But the overall picture is clear: children born to married parents are much more likely to have a stable upbringing than those born to unmarried parents.<sup>7</sup> This reflects a whole range of factors, including parental age, education, and earnings, as well as the very different chances that a child is born as a result of an intended, rather than unintended, pregnancy.<sup>8</sup>

In terms of both intergenerational equity and shorter-term income inequality, then, the strength and stability of adult couple relationships matter a great deal. Which means that, in most cases, marriage matters, too.

## Relationship Quality – Is a Good Marriage Hard to Find?

Beneath the surface of ongoing debates about the role of marriage in society is a deeper question about *relationship quality*. To the extent that marriage is able to act as a scaffold for the building of high-quality relationships, it will remain an important and attractive institution. But to the degree that it does not, it will decline as a valued social institution, which raises some important questions. Is marriage working in this way? Does marriage not only express, but also *enable* better relationships? What expectations, norms, or institutions act to deepen or dilute the link between marriage and relationship quality?

The quality of relationships within marriage—indeed, within all kinds of family relationships—is important, both in itself, in terms of getting the benefits of the relationship, and because it is likely to predict a longer-lasting partnership and, therefore, greater stability for children. But it may also matter in terms of whether people decide to get married in the first place. If young adults are skeptical that marriage does, in fact, deliver some of these relational benefits, they are likely to decide against marriage or perhaps to treat it less seriously. If a good marriage seems hard to find, why bother?

If relationship quality within marriage matters, and we believe that it does, an important question is what social institutions and social norms help? Are nations across the globe sustaining the cultural, economic, and social conditions where strong and stable relationships can form and flourish?

<sup>4</sup> C. Kollmeyer, “Family Structure, Female Employment, and National Income Inequality: A Cross-National Study of 16 Western Countries,” *European Sociological Review* 29, no. 4 (2013): 816-827; M. Martin, “Family Structure and Income Inequality in Families with Children, 1976 to 2000,” *Demography* 43, no. 3 (2006): 421-445; S. McLanahan & C. Percheski, “Family Structure and the Reproduction of Inequalities,” *Annual Reviews* 34, no. 1 (2008): 257-276; A. Peichl, et al., “Does Size Matter? The Impact of Changes in Household Structure on Income Distribution in Germany,” *The Review of Income and Wealth* 58, no. 1 (2012): 118-141.

<sup>5</sup> A. Ahituv and R. Lerman, “How Do Marital Status, Work Efforts, and Wage Rates Interact?” *Demography* 44, no. 3 (2007): 623-647; D. Dinescu et al., “Is Marriage a Buzzkill? A Twin Study of Marital Status and Alcohol Consumption,” *Journal of Family Psychology*, 30, no. 6 (2016): 698-707; L. Waite and E. Lehrer, “The Benefits From Marriage and Religion in the United States: A Comparative Analysis,” *Population and Development Review* 29, no. 2 (2004): 255-275.

<sup>6</sup> A. Cherlin, *The Marriage-Go-Round* (New York: Knopf, 2009); P. Fomby, J.A. Goode, and S. Mollborn, “Family Complexity, Siblings, and Children’s Aggressive Behavior at School Entry,” *Demography* 26, no.1 (2016): 1-26; P. Fomby and C. Osborne, “Family Instability, Multipartner Fertility, and Behavior in Middle Childhood,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 79, no. 1 (2017): 75-93.

<sup>7</sup> 2017 *World Family Map* (Charlottesville: IFS, 2017); K. Musick and K. Micheltore, “Cross-National Comparisons of Union Stability in Cohabiting and Married Families with Children,” *Demography* 55, no. 4 (2018): 1389-1421.

<sup>8</sup> R. Reeves and E. Krause, “Cohabiting Parents Differ from Married Ones in 3 Big Ways,” *Social Mobility Memos*, The Brookings Institution, 4/5/17.

In this essay, we use cross-national survey data to examine whether one major civic institution—religion—is a positive force for forming and maintaining such relationships. Also, given the ties between religion and gender traditionalism, we also extend these analyses to consider how religion interacts with gender ideology when it comes to relationship quality.

## Defining Relationship Quality

It hardly needs saying that relationship quality is difficult to measure and necessarily involves some strong normative judgments on the part of the measurer. In this paper, we use three main indicators of relationship quality, all based on self-reported answers to specific questions in the survey:

- **Global relationship quality.** We calculated an index of global relationship quality by adding measures of overall relationship satisfaction, emotional attachment, commitment, and perceived stability, and the mean value for this index is 15.66 for women and 16.07 for men. (This index is based on agreement/disagreement with the following four statements: “I am satisfied with my overall relationship with my partner”; “I feel close and engaged in our relationship”; “My relationship with my partner is more important to me than almost anything else in my life”; and, “In the past 12 months, I have had serious doubts that my relationship will last.”).
- **Satisfaction with sex life.** This indicator consists of the predicted probability of respondents reporting that they “strongly agree” with the statement, “I am satisfied with my sexual relationship with my partner.” Across the whole sample, 34% of respondents reported this level of satisfaction with their sexual relationship (35% of women, 33% of men).<sup>9</sup>
- **Joint decision-making.** This indicator of relationship quality is the proportion of respondents reporting that “major household decisions” are jointly decided, rather than mostly by one partner (either the respondent or their partner): 60% of respondents were joint decision-makers on this metric (60% of women, 59% of men).

## Religion and Relationship Quality

Do the norms, rituals, and networks associated with religious communities—Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam, among other faiths—strengthen relationships or undercut them in nations across the globe? Specifically, do highly religious couples enjoy higher-quality relationships, better sex lives, and more joint decision-making in their relationships? Or, what does contemporary faith have to do with love in countries across the Americas, Europe, and Oceania?

Although most developed nations have taken a more secular turn in recent decades, the majority of couples still report some degree of religious observance and a significant minority of couples report high levels of religious devotion. The research to date on religion and relationships indicates that there is generally a positive association between these two institutions, but the scholarship has largely focused on the United States.<sup>10</sup> Here, we focus on two questions. Do the benefits of shared religious activity hold for modern couples in countries across Europe, Australia, and North and South America? Furthermore, in the contemporary context, a growing number of couples have high levels of similarity when it comes to their joint secularity—defined here as *not participating* in religious activities. Does this type of “secular similarity” produce the same outcomes for couples that we have seen for shared religious participation in previous studies?

<sup>9</sup> Experimenting with different cut points yielded results consistent with what is reported here.

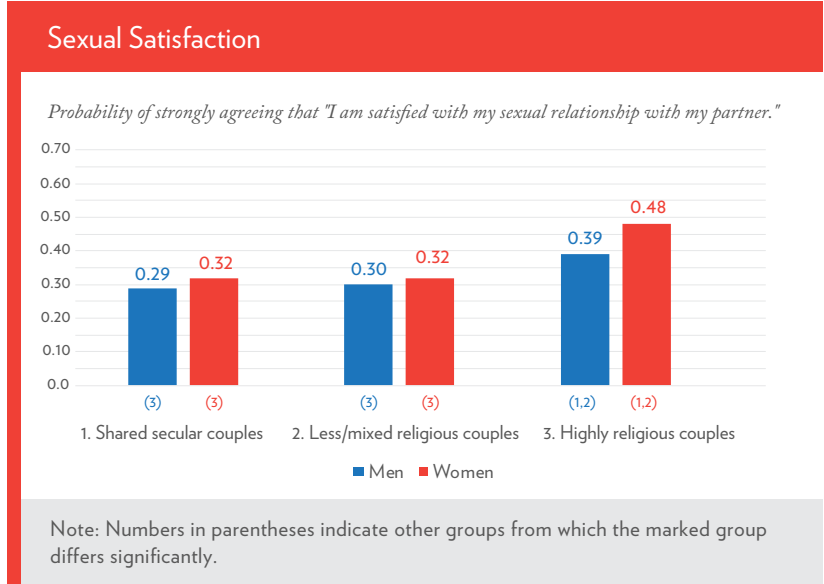
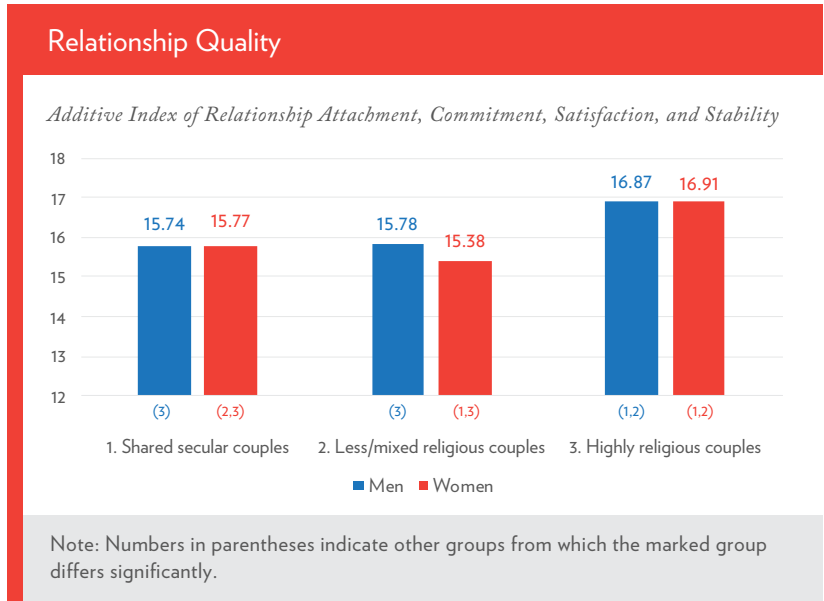
<sup>10</sup> A. Mahoney, “Religion in Families, 1999-2009: A Relational Spirituality Framework,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72, no. 4 (2010): 805-827; J. Dew, J. Uecker and B. Willoughby, “Joint Religiosity and Married Couples’ Sexual Satisfaction,” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (2018: advance online publication); C. Ellison, et al., “Sanctification, Stress, and Marital Quality,” *Family Relations* 60, no.4 (2011): 404-420; W. B. Wilcox and N. Wolfinger, *Soul Mates: Religion, Sex, Love, and Marriage Among African Americans and Latinos* (UK: Oxford University Press, 2016).



We address these questions with a sample of 9,566 men and women in heterosexual relationships in Australia, Argentina, Canada, Chile, Colombia, France, Ireland, Mexico, Peru, United Kingdom, and the United States drawn from the Global Family and Gender Survey, or GFGS (see the Data & Methods section for more details). All of our analyses control for a range of sociodemographic factors, including measures of education, income, gender, nativity, age, marital status, parental relationship status, and children in the home. We divided respondents into three religious categories:

- **Shared secular couples.** These are married or cohabiting men and women who report they “never” attend religious services and that their partner or spouse is “as religious” or “less religious” than they are. They make up nearly 19% of the GFGS international sample.
- **Less/mixed religious couples.** These are defined as those who report that both they and their partner engage in fairly minimal religious service attendance (once a month or less), plus respondents who attend religious services regularly themselves but have partners who are less religious than they are. Of these less/mixed religious couples, 87% reported shared minimal religious attendance, while in 13% of these couples, the respondent was a regular attender partnered with a less devout spouse or partner. Together, they make up 60% of our international sample.
- **Highly religious couples.** These are respondents who attend religious services regularly (2-3 times a month or more) and whose spouse or partner is as religious or more religious than they are. These couples make up 21% of the GFGS international sample.

There is a strong association between shared regular participation in a religious community and both relationship quality and sexual satisfaction in our sample of married and cohabiting heterosexual couples. For instance, women and men in highly religious couples were significantly more likely to report higher quality relationships than their peers in less/mixed religious couples or shared secular couples. While both women and men in highly religious couples reported significantly higher overall relationship quality and satisfaction with their sex life, the results in both cases were strongest for women in these couples. In fact, women in highly religious





Both secular and religious couples report high levels of joint decision-making.

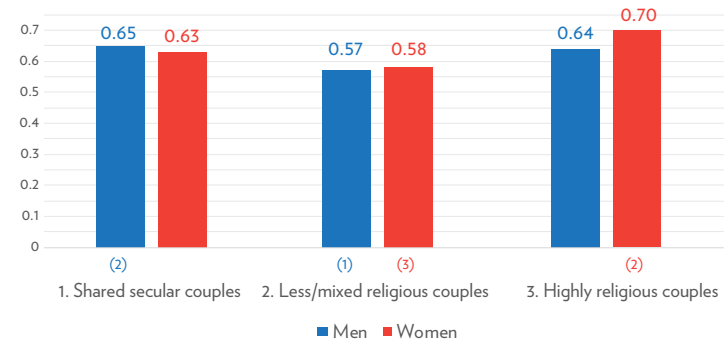
relationships are about 50% more likely to report that they are strongly satisfied with their sexual relationship than their secular and less religious counterparts in the GFGS.

While women in shared secular relationships had significantly higher overall relationship quality than women in less/mixed religious couples, there were no differences between these groups on sexual satisfaction. And no differences were found between men in less/mixed religious couples and men in shared secular couples on either overall relationship quality or sexual satisfaction. We also found that the benefits of religious participation for relationship quality are remarkably similar across individuals with different religious affiliations and are generally greater than for those reporting no affiliation or that are “spiritual, but not religious” (see Religious Affiliation Table below).

Similarly high levels of shared decision-making were reported in shared secular couples and highly religious couples, with slightly lower levels among the less/

## Shared Decision-Making

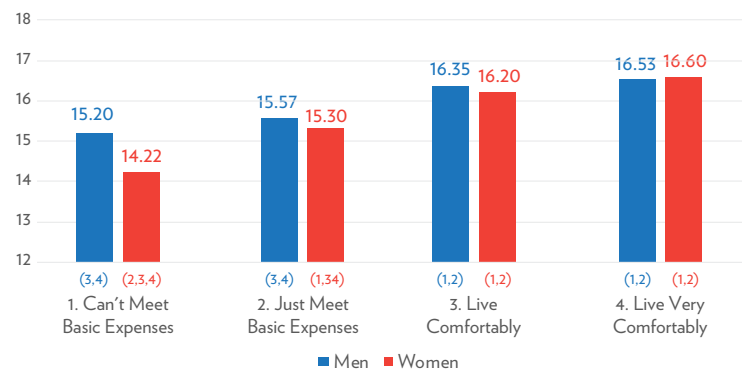
*Probability of reporting that major household decisions are made together.*



Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate other groups from which the marked group differs significantly.

## Relationship Quality

*Additive Index of Relationship Attachment, Commitment, Satisfaction, and Stability*



Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate other groups from which the marked group differs significantly.

## Religious Affiliation Table

	Overall		Religious Service Attenders		Infrequent/Never Service Attenders	
	Avg. Relat. Quality	N	Avg. Relat. Quality	N	Avg. Relat. Quality	N
Catholic	15.83	3471	16.70	628	15.53	2843
Protestant	16.36	1703	17.41	579	15.72	1124
LDS	17.24	89	17.19	58		
Orthodox	15.25	145			14.94	127
Muslim	15.83	278	15.82	97	15.83	181
Jewish	14.9	62			14.71	51
Hindu	14.96	176			15.16	137
Buddhist	15.12	128			14.84	108
SBNR	15.6	1189			15.49	1161
Not Religious	15.52	2820			15.53	2787
Other	15.62	432	16.64	69	15.36	363

Note: Outcomes only reported for categories with more than 50 respondents



mixed religious couples. Compared to less religious men, shared secular men were more likely to make decisions together with their partners, whereas highly religious women were more likely than their less religious counterparts to report making joint decisions.

It is worth noting that the controls used in our analyses are also linked to relationship quality. Specifically, as expected, we found that greater income is associated with higher levels of relationship quality. In fact, income predicts overall relationship quality about as strongly as religious attendance. The income figure on the following page is illustrative.

We also found that married couples reported significantly higher levels of relationship quality than cohabiting couples; and interestingly, couples with children in the home reported slightly *lower* levels of quality than couples without children in the home, perhaps reflecting the time and financial pressures on parents.

**Overall, faith is linked to higher quality relationships and more sexual satisfaction.**

## Egalitarianism and Relationship Quality

Many scholars and journalists have long expressed concern with how many religious traditions have lent legitimacy to the ideas that men and women are different, that women have a unique role to play in the care of the young, and especially that men have unique roles in the home or religious community.<sup>11</sup> From this perspective, religion is viewed as a potential force for patriarchal relations that devalue women and undercut the possibility of high-quality relationships.<sup>12</sup> The counter belief is that rather than a shared commitment to religion, relationship quality might rely on shared commitment to equality or sameness between men and women—in other words, to an egalitarian approach to marriage rather than a traditional one.

In order to examine the influence of attitudes about gender roles on relationship quality, we segmented our sample into two groups, based on their agreement or disagreement with the statement: “It is usually better for everyone involved if the father takes the lead in working outside the home and the mother takes the lead in caring for the home and family.” The two groups are:

- *Traditionalists*, those who mostly or completely agreed with the statement (55% of our sample).
- *Progressives*, who mostly or completely disagreed with the statement (45% of our sample).

Our analyses found that there is no consistent link between gender ideology and the relationship outcomes we examined. We found that gender progressives are somewhat more likely to share decision-making in their relationships than gender traditionalists. However, when it comes to relationship quality, gender ideology makes no difference for either men or women. Finally, for sexual satisfaction, we find that traditionalists—both men and women—are more satisfied.

<sup>11</sup> W. B. Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, J. McQuillan and M. Ferree, “The Importance of Variation Among Husbands and the Benefits of Feminism for Families,” in Alan Booth (ed.), *Men in Families* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1997); S. Rakoczy, “Religion and Violence: the Suffering of Women,” *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 18, no. 61 (2004): 29-35.

<sup>13</sup> Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men* (2004): pg 207.

## Religion and Egalitarianism: Friends or Foes?

What about the inter-relationship between religiosity and views on gender? It seems highly likely that more religious couples will also have more traditional views on gender (and that is, in fact, what we find). But it is also possible that the effects of gender traditionalism may *vary* by levels of religiosity in couples' relationships, or vice versa. Religion could reinforce patriarchal dynamics, casting a "veil of enchantment" over unequal family relationships.<sup>13</sup> But religion could also act in a protective fashion against possible negative effects of traditionalist views, by increasing respect or appreciation for the complementarity of a spouse. Sociologists Samuel Perry and Andrew Whitehead argue that religion can moderate "the ways gender ideology influences heterosexual relationship outcomes."<sup>14</sup>

In short, religion may channel gender traditionalism into a family-centered form of living that gives partners clear norms for their relationship and family life but does so in ways that are interpreted as solidarity-enhancing rather than as patriarchal. By contrast, gender traditionalism in more secular or only nominally-religious contexts may function

as feminist critics fear, giving men a license to treat their partners in more domineering and less considerate ways (see Chapter 3 by DeRose, Johnson, and Wang for more on this subject).

We examine the interaction between religion and gender attitudes in our international sample. Our analysis focuses, then, on six groups: "progressives" in each of our three religious categories, and "traditionalists" in each category.<sup>15</sup>

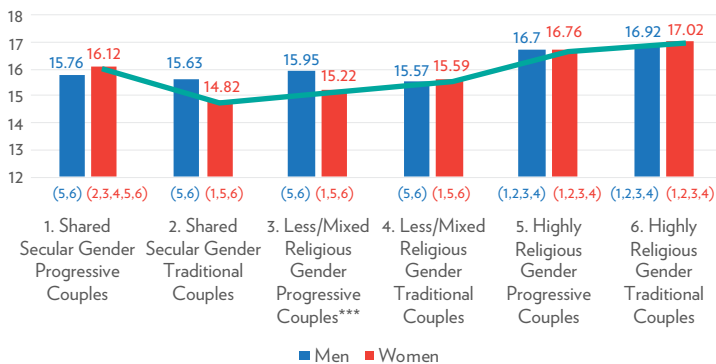
In general, there appears to be more variation among women across these groups than men. Self-reported relationship quality is highest among traditionalist women in highly religious couples and progressive women in highly religious couples. Shared secular progressive women reported higher levels of satisfaction

compared to women in less religious couples and shared secular traditional women. For women, then, there is a J-Curve in relationship quality, with secular progressive women doing comparatively well, women in the middle doing less well, and highly religious women reporting the highest quality relationships. Among men, highly religious traditional men were found to be significantly higher in relationship quality than men in shared secular progressive and less religious progressive relationships.

With sexual satisfaction, a different pattern emerged with highly religious traditional women being significantly more likely to be sexually satisfied than women in all other groups – including highly religious progressive women. This reveals that the higher levels of sexual satisfaction identified previously for women in highly religious

### Relationship Quality

Additive Index of Relationship Attachment, Commitment, Satisfaction, and Stability



Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate other groups from which the marked group differs significantly.

<sup>14</sup> S. Perry and A. Whitehead, "For Better or Worse? Gender Ideology, Religious Commitment, and Relationship Quality," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 55, no. 4 (2017): 737-755.

<sup>15</sup> The proportion of our sample in each of the six groups is as follows: Secular Shared Gender Progressives (13%), Secular Shared Gender Traditionals (5%), Less Religious Gender Progressive Couples (34%), Less Religious Gender Traditional Couples (27%), Highly Religious Gender Progressive Couples (8%), Highly Religious Gender Traditional Couples (13%).

relationships are consolidated among traditional women and not shared to the same degree by progressive women in highly religious relationships.

Our analysis of shared decision-making patterns proved to be more balanced across relationship types and gender ideologies. However, the group reporting the highest levels of shared decision-making was progressive women in highly religious couples, while the lowest levels were among traditional men and women in shared secular and less religious relationships. Still, traditional women in highly religious couples reported similar levels of shared decision-making as their secular progressive counterparts.

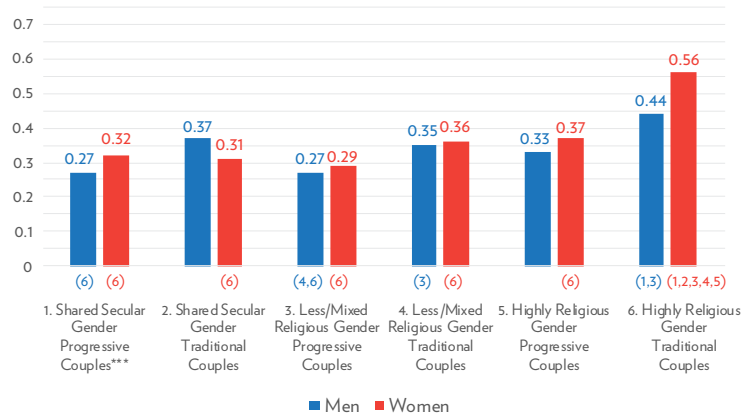
As with all of our findings, it is not possible to establish any causal relationship here. It is possible that simply *being* married is more important to highly religious women, which may raise their satisfaction ratings. They may be more likely to look at their relationship through a rose-colored lens. It is also possible that respondents with different attitudes towards gender and religion have different expectations of marriage, including of their sex lives. On the other hand, highly religious women may also enjoy higher levels of trust, emotional security, and perceived permanence, which redound to the benefit of their relationships.

Nonetheless, the findings on shared decision-making patterns do challenge stereotypes about religiously conservative couples. Scholars have often assumed that such couples do not treat one another equally.<sup>16</sup> But at least when it comes to decision-making, the comparatively high levels of shared decision-making among highly religious couples suggests that their views are not an obstacle to working together. But for more secular couples, gender traditionalism does seem to stand in the way of shared decision-making.

<sup>16</sup> Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men*, 2004.

## Sexual Satisfaction

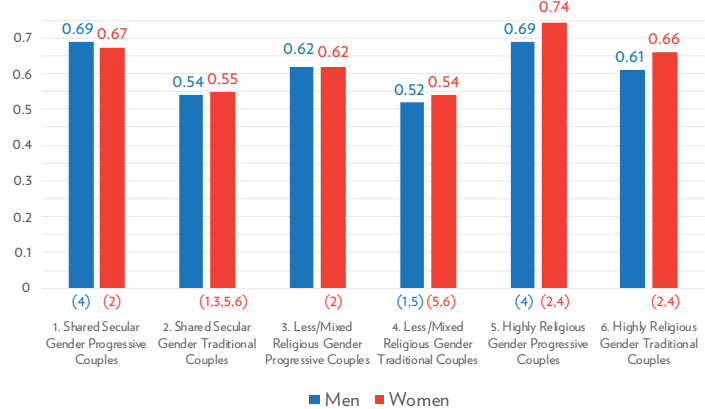
Probability of strongly agreeing that "I am satisfied with my sexual relationship with my partner."



Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate other groups from which the marked group differs significantly.

## Shared Decision-Making

Probability of reporting that major household decisions are made together.



Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate other groups from which the marked group differs significantly.

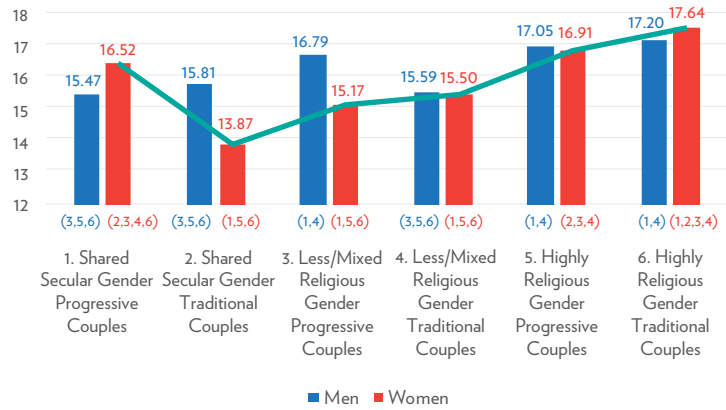
## Faith, Feminism, and Marriage in the U.S.

So far, we have examined the relationship between religion and gender attitudes in an international context. Country-specific results for relationship quality are found in the “Country Reports” section of this report, but should be interpreted as suggestive because we rely on opt-in samples for countries besides the United States. Here, we briefly share results for the U.S., which are based on a nationally representative sample. The proportion of respondents in each religious category was as follows: shared secular couples (20%), less/mixed religious couples (56%), and highly religious couples (24%). In terms of views on gender roles, the split was between 55% progressives and 45% traditionalists.

Overall, the U.S. findings are similar to those for the international samples, with men and women in highly religious relationships reporting higher quality relationships than those in secular and less/mixed religious relationships. When we look at religion and gender ideology together, for women again, there is a J-Curve, with women in shared secular relationships reporting comparatively high relationship quality and women in highly religious relationships indicating the highest quality relationships in terms of satisfaction, attachment, commitment, and stability.

### Relationship Quality: United States

*Additive Index of Relationship Attachment, Commitment, Satisfaction, and Stability*



Note: Numbers in parentheses indicate other groups from which the marked group differs significantly.

The link between gender attitudes about the division of paid work and domestic work and relationship quality varies by the religiosity/secularity of the couple.

## Conclusion

While the analyses presented here suggest clear links between religion and relationship quality, no claim can be made about a causal connection, or indeed, if there is a causal connection, in which direction. Part of the story here may be due to selection—men and women who take family life seriously may be more attracted to the family-centered way of life found in many religious communities. There are other underlying traits—optimism, hope, etc.—that could also help explain the associations documented in this chapter. As mentioned above, views of what makes for a satisfactory marriage may also vary by religiosity or views regarding gender roles. The interactions between religious beliefs and practices,

<sup>17</sup> D. Dollahite & L. Marks, “A Conceptual Model of Family and Religious Processes in Highly Religious Families,” *Review of Religious Research* 50, no. 4 (2009): 373-391.

<sup>18</sup> K. Curtis and C. Ellison, “Religious Heterogamy and Marital Conflict: Findings from the National Survey of Families and Households,” *Journal of Family Issues* 23, no. 4 (2002): 551-576.

<sup>19</sup> N. Wolfinger & W.B. Wilcox, “Happily Ever After? Religion, Marital Status, Gender and Relationship Quality in Urban Families,” *Social Forces* 86, no. 3 (2008): 1311-1387.



attitudes toward gender, and assessments of marital quality are necessarily complex and subjective. For some, marriage may be little more than a contract; for others, a deep personal commitment; and for some, a holy sacrament.

All that said, the analysis presented here suggests that we should at least take seriously the possibility that shared religious faith can help build higher quality relationships. In particular, the *beliefs*, *behaviors*, and *belonging* that shared religious participation provides for couples may foster more commitment, trust, respect, or generosity.

Religious traditions seek to foster norms—such as marital permanence and fidelity—that may strengthen or reinforce the ties binding partners to one another.<sup>17</sup> Religious teachings also place a strong emphasis on love, forgiveness, respectful behavior, and putting the needs of others above one’s own. Taken together, these beliefs, as sociologists Kristen Taylor Curtis and Christopher Ellison have observed, may “reinforce beliefs about the sanctity of marriage, while helping to define appropriate marital conduct and assisting partners in fulfilling their familial roles.”<sup>18</sup> In today’s world, the value of many of these beliefs may also extend to cohabiting couples.<sup>19</sup>

A second potential contribution is through the fact of shared activities and behavior. Since at least Durkheim, we have known that rituals have power to engender life with greater power and meaning—including our relationships and family life. Couples in which both members attend church are more likely to say that they often pray together.<sup>20</sup> Prayer and other shared religious activities may help men and women deal with stressful life events, envision better futures for their loved ones, and change destructive patterns of behavior<sup>21</sup> (see the Marks and Dollahite essay in the sidebar of this report for more on this subject).

Finally, religious communities may provide networks that can support couples, especially in times of trouble. One U.S. study found that almost half of jointly-attending religious couples form the majority of their friendships with fellow parishioners—and that such shared friendships played a major role in accounting for the link between churchgoing and higher relationship quality.<sup>22</sup>

It should be said that many other kinds of institutions and affiliations may provide these benefits and do for many people: secular civic institutions of one form or another, social networks formed through work, neighborhood proximity, or personal interests, and so on. But perhaps many religions are able to provide more of these benefits in the same local congregation, at least for some people.

It is also important to note that there is more than one path to relationship quality. The way that specific individuals negotiate their relationships and honor their commitments will vary, not only between couples but within the course of one relationship. This report, for instance, suggests more than one path towards marital bliss. Contra Tolstoy, happy families come in more than one variety.

<sup>20</sup> See Marks & Dollahite’s essay in the sidebar of this report; Wilcox and Wolfinger, *Soul Mates*, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. Also, M. Goodman & D. Dollahite, “How Religious Couples Perceive the Influence of God in Their Marriage,” *Review of Religious Research* 48, no. 2 (2006): 141-155; J. Olson et al., “Shared Religious Beliefs, Prayer, and Forgiveness as Predictors of Marital Satisfaction,” *Family Relations* 64, no. 4 (2015): 519-533;

<sup>22</sup> Wilcox and Wolfinger, 2016.