

THE TIES THAT BIND: Is Faith a Global Force for Good or Ill in the Family?

Executive Summary

W. Bradford Wilcox, Laurie DeRose, and Jason S. Carroll

Does religion foster solidarity—or fuel conflict and inequality? Today’s headlines suggest the answer is “yes” to both. Yes, as Emile Durkheim taught us, religion can be and is a force for solidarity, but at the same time, as Max Weber taught us, religion can be and is also a force for conflict and inequality. In *The Ties that Bind*, we consider a more specific question: is religion a force for good or ill in families around the globe?

This report answers this question by looking at the relationship between religion and four important outcomes—relationship quality, fertility, domestic violence, and infidelity—in 11 countries in the Americas, Europe, and Oceania. These questions are especially salient in an era marked by what the *New York Times* has called the rise of post-familism in developing countries, where marriage and childbearing are in retreat in most higher-income countries. Faith may buffer against this post-familial turn, both by attaching particular meaning and importance to family life and by offering norms and networks that foster family solidarity. But these questions are also important given that religion may be a force for ill—legitimizing gender inequality or violence in the family—a concern that has taken on particular salience in light of recent headlines about religion, domestic violence, and child sexual abuse.

Beyond the headlines, however, this report seeks to understand how religion is linked, on average, to four key family outcomes in 11 countries: Argentina, Australia, Chile, Canada, Colombia, France, Ireland, Mexico, Peru, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Drawing on data from the World Values Survey (WVS) and the Global Family and Gender Survey (GFGS), this report suggests that:

- **When it comes to relationship quality in heterosexual relationships, highly religious couples enjoy higher-quality relationships and more sexual satisfaction, compared to less/mixed religious couples and secular couples.** For instance, women in highly religious relationships are about 50% more likely to report that they are strongly satisfied with their sexual relationship than their secular and less religious counterparts. Joint decision-making, however, is more common among men in shared secular relationships and women in highly religious relationships, compared to their peers in less/mixed religious couples.
- **When it comes to fertility, data from low-fertility countries in the Americas, East Asia, and Europe show that religion’s positive influence on fertility has become stronger in recent decades.** Today, people ages 18-49 who attend religious services regularly have 0.27 more children than those who never, or practically never, attend. The report also indicates that marriage plays an important role in explaining religion’s continued positive influence on childbearing because religious men and women are more likely to marry compared to their more secular peers, and the married have more children than the unmarried.

- **When it comes to domestic violence, religious couples in heterosexual relationships do not have an advantage over secular couples or less/mixed religious couples.** Measures of intimate partner violence (IPV)—which includes physical abuse, as well as sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and controlling behaviors—do not differ in a statistically significant way by religiosity. Slightly more than 20% of the men in our sample report perpetuating IPV, and a bit more than 20% of the women in our sample indicate that they have been victims of IPV in their relationship. Our results suggest, then, that religion is not protective against domestic violence for this sample of couples from the Americas, Europe, and Oceania. However, religion is not an increased risk factor for domestic violence in these countries, either.
- **The relationships between faith, feminism, and family outcomes are complex.** The impact of gender ideology on the outcomes covered in this report, for instance, often varies by the religiosity of our respondents. When it comes to relationship quality, we 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, whereas women in the ideological and religious middle report lower levels of relationship quality, as do traditionalist women in secular relationships; but women in highly religious relationships, especially traditionalists, report the highest levels of relationship quality. For domestic violence, we find that progressive women in secular relationships report comparatively low levels of IPV compared to conservative women in less/mixed religious relationships. In sum, the impact of gender ideology on contemporary family life may vary a great deal by whether or not a couple is highly religious, nominally religious, or secular.

In many respects, this report indicates that faith is a force for good in contemporary family life in the Americas, Europe, and Oceania. Men and women who share an active religious life, for instance, enjoy higher levels of relationship quality and sexual satisfaction compared to their peers in secular or less/mixed religious relationships. They also have more children and are more likely to marry. At the same time, we do *not* find that faith protects women from domestic violence in married and cohabiting relationships. Overall, then, this report suggests the family-friendly norms and networks associated with religious communities reinforce the ties that bind; the challenge facing those communities, however, is to build on these strengths to address families who are struggling—including the approximately one-in-five of their adherents who experience intimate partner violence.