

FOCUSED ON THEIR FAMILIES:

**RELIGION, PARENTING, &
CHILD WELLBEING**

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, scholars have drawn attention to religious commitments to patriarchy and parental authority to argue that religion—especially conservative Protestantism—fosters an authoritarian approach to parenting. Indeed, using data from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), this study does find that religious attendance and theological conservatism are associated with higher levels of corporal punishment among parents—potentially an indicator of authoritarian parenting. But religious attendance and theological conservatism are also associated with lower levels of parental yelling and with higher levels of praising and hugging among parents, which are indicators of an authoritative style of parenting. Moreover, data from the Survey of Adults and Youth (SAY) indicate that religious attendance and orthodoxy are generally associated with greater parental investments in childrearing, more intergenerational closure, and more social control. In other words, conservative Protestants, Orthodox Jews, traditional Catholics, and other parents who regularly attend religious services are more likely than other parents to adopt an authoritative style of parenting that is beneficial to children.

INTRODUCTION

The historical, social, and theological ties that bind religion and the family to one another run deep (Greven 1988; Christiano 2000). But these ties are by no means without controversy. In recent years, scholars have increasingly drawn attention to religious commitments to patriarchy and parental authority to argue that religion exerts a baleful influence on parents and, by extension, their children. Accordingly, this essay sets out to answer a basic question: Does religion foster the seedbeds of parental virtue or parental vice?

A growing, but largely speculative, literature by religious scholars, psychologists, and sociologists asserts that religion, particularly conservative Protestantism, fosters an authoritarian and abusive approach to parenting. In 1991, Princeton Theological Seminary Professor Donald Capps delivered a presidential address to the Scientific Study of Religion entitled, “Religion and Child Abuse: Perfect Together.” Capps argued that the religious endorsement of corporal punishment—found, for example, in evangelical Protestant advice books like James Dobson’s *Dare to Discipline* (1970)—encourages parents to adopt an abusive parenting style. In a similar vein, John Gottman, the noted family psychologist, has written, “As the religious right gains strength in the United States, there is also a movement of some fathers toward authoritarian parenting in childrearing patterns of discipline” (Gottman 1998: 183). And sociologists Julia McQuillan and Myra Max Ferree (1998: 213) have argued that “the religious right” is an influential force “pushing men toward authoritarian and stereotypical forms of masculinity and attempting to renew patriarchal family relations.”

Taken together, this literature makes two central claims. First, religion, especially conservative Protestantism, promotes an abusive or authoritarian parenting style. As Baumrind’s (1971) seminal work on parenting suggests, an *authoritarian* parenting style is marked by a harsh and erratic approach to discipline, minimal expressions of affection, and low levels of

parental responsiveness. Second, this literature also suggests that religion, especially conservative Protestantism, promotes a *patriarchal* style of parenting among men characterized by, among other things, low-levels of paternal warmth and involvement. These two styles of parenting have been linked to negative child and adolescent outcomes (Amato 1998; Amato and Rivera 1999; Baumrind 1971; Maccoby and Martin 1983; Thomson, Hanson, and McLanahan 1994).

However, this perspective is based on virtually no empirical research. Moreover, the sociological theory of James Coleman suggests that religious institutions should have a largely beneficial effect on parents—especially in comparison to the other institutional actors that parents regularly encounter in the social world. There are also good theoretical reasons to hypothesize that parents with orthodox religious convictions, including conservative Protestant parents, will be particularly motivated to devote themselves to their children. Indeed, after briefly outlining a theoretical perspective on the link between religion and parenting, I proceed to show that evangelical parents and fathers, and religious parents more generally, come closer to typifying the *authoritative* style of parenting that Baumrind and others have linked to a range of positive outcomes among children and adolescents (Amato and Booth 1997; Baumrind 1971; Maccoby and Martin 1983; Thomson, Hanson, and McLanahan 1994).

RELIGION, ORTHODOXY, & PARENTING: A Theoretical Perspective

The work of James Coleman, who is best known for his contributions to a theory of social capital, suggests a number of reasons why religious institutions may play a salutary role in promoting an authoritative approach to parenting. In analyzing the institutions that influence children, Coleman (1990) distinguishes between two types of institutional actors: *primordial* institutions like religious bodies and families and *purposive* institutions like corporations and

state welfare agencies. He argues that primordial institutions generally have a more beneficial effect on children than do purposive institutions because the former tend to treat children as ends in themselves whereas the latter tend to treat children in instrumental terms. I extend his argument to reflect on the ways that religion as a primordial institution may have a more beneficial impact on parents than the purposive institutions that parents also encounter in the social world.

Primordial institutions have three characteristics that may be beneficial for parenting. First, they are organized around a collective belief-system that stresses a particular vision of the good life and a range of virtues that help their members realize this good. In the case of religious actors, members are encouraged to serve God and neighbor and to acquire virtues like truthfulness, fortitude, and charity that enable them to live out the collective goals of their community. More specifically, the generic and parent-related moral beliefs advanced by religious institutions help to motivate parents to make the considerable sacrifices of time, will-power, and energy that are required to form good character in their children (Ammerman 1997; Wilcox 2002).

Second, primordial institutions have a long-term time horizon that leaves them with a profound stake in the moral character of their members. Because their members tend to be involved for a lifetime, primordial institutions have an inherent interest in cultivating virtues in their members—especially young members—that make them good institutional citizens. This is especially true of religious institutions because they are trying to pass on a body of religious belief and practice from one generation to the next. In Coleman’s (2000: 600) words, “This creates an intrinsic interest of the religious body in the kind of the person the child is and will become.” In particular, religious institutions have a strong interest in promoting an ethic of intensive, sacrificial parenting that will lead the rising generation to faith.

Third, primordial institutions foster intergenerational closure. This means that primordial actors like churches promote social ties between children, parents, and other adults in the community. These close ties allow adults to offer support and sanction for community-defined norms about parenting. These ties are also an important source of social support for parents when they are facing serious difficulties of a familial (e.g., disabled child) or extrafamilial (e.g., unemployment) nature (Ellison 1994). Thus, religion should promote better parenting insofar as it connects parents to social networks that reinforce religious and community parenting norms and help parents deal with the stresses of family life.

By contrast, purposive institutions tend to have mixed effects on parents and children. First, unlike primordial institutions, purposive institutions are not organized around a collective belief-system. As commercial or public institutions organized around narrow goals like profit or the provision of a social service, purposive actors do not focus on an encompassing vision of the good life; indeed, in a liberal pluralistic society, public institutions are unable to endorse a specific vision of the good life. This means that purposive institutions cannot supply parents with a belief system that might motivate them to make considerable sacrifices on behalf of their children. So, for instance, a welfare agency may offer a parenting skills class to recipients but will refrain from offering a comprehensive moral vision of the parenting enterprise for fear of upsetting the religious and moral convictions of one part of the population or another.

Second, purposive institutions do not take a long-term view of the persons that they deal with, either because they deal with them only over a short period of time or because they are at some social distance from them. Thus, they have no incentive to foster virtue in the persons they influence because they do not have to maintain direct contact with them on an ongoing basis. Thus, purposive institutions have no need to foster parental virtue. Take the entertainment industry, which exerts a massive influence on American family life. Industry programming aims

to make a profit by offering programming that attracts the attention of consumers who have no long-term or personal connection to the company that produces the programming. Thus, entertainment companies have no institutional stake in the effects that their programming may have on parents. Consider this exchange between a mother and Jerry Springer on his nationally-syndicated talk show:

JERRY SPRINGER: Mom, why are you going out with him?

MOM: Because I love him.

SPRINGER: How could you love him? He slept with your twelve-year-old daughter! ... You don't see anything wrong in this story? What about your daughter? She's hurt.

MOM: I love Amber . . . And I want both Amber and Glen to be in my life. And ... if Amber can't accept it, then she can just stay living with her father and she can stay out of my life.

SPRINGER: You're saying that to your own daughter? What's wrong with you? That's your daughter. That's your flesh and blood.

MOM: It's just the way it is. I'm not going to be miserable because her and her father want things their way. (Hewlett and West 1998: 126)

Clearly, the Jerry Springer Show offers a venial portrait of parenting, regardless of Springer's gestures in the direction of the high road. But the reason that Universal Studios produces programming like this is that it is popular and profitable and the company has no direct, long-term contact with the consumers who watch it.

Purposive institutions also do not foster intergenerational closure. Given their short-term focus on narrowly-defined ends, they have no need to bring adults and children into relationship

with one another in the ongoing pursuit of a collective good. Thus, purposive actors like corporations and public bureaucracies are unable to furnish the social networks that can be so helpful to parents. The Jerry Springer Show, for example, may bring children and adults together in the limited sense that they are all watching the same show. But this virtual community does not offer any social ties marked by solidarity, reciprocity, or obligation.

For all these reasons, Coleman's theory suggests that any type of religion should have largely beneficial effects on parents. But particular forms of religion may be more likely to promote good parenting. Specifically, orthodox religion is more likely to promote good parenting than other forms of religion. Orthodox religion is committed to an objective, constant, and definable body of religious and moral truths. In the words of James Davison Hunter (1991: 44), orthodoxy defines "a consistent, unchangeable measure of value, purpose, goodness, and identity, both personal and collective. It tells us what is good, what is true, how we should live, and who we are." Moreover, the strong, distinctive beliefs promoted by orthodox religions usually engender a sacrificial ethic on behalf of their faith among their adherents that translates into higher levels of religious participation, financial support for religious activities, and adherence to the moral teachings of the faith (Stark and Finke 2000; Smith 1998).

This paper focuses on three different types of orthodox religious groups in the U.S.: conservative Protestants, traditional Catholics, and Orthodox Jews. Conservative Protestants believe that the Bible is the literal word of God and is the authoritative guide to religious and moral truth. Traditional Catholics believe that biblical revelation and sacred tradition, as interpreted by the magisterium (teaching office) of the Catholic Church, provide all necessary truth about faith and the moral life. Orthodox Jews believe that the Torah is the revealed word of God, and that the Talmud provides an authoritative guide to the beliefs and practices required by the Torah of all faithful Jews.

Why might orthodox religionists be better parents? First, the intensity of their religious belief motivates them to devote more time and energy to forming the religious character of their children than other parents. Second, the moral teaching embodied in their traditions places great stress on the obligations of parenthood. Third, they tend to have tight social networks that provide high levels of social support and normative integration. Finally, the dramatic cultural revolution that swept the United States after the 1960s, a revolution which challenged religious and moral beliefs dear to orthodox religious believers, prompted many conservative Protestants, traditional Catholics, and Orthodox Jews to devote themselves even more to parenting for fear that outside influences—from peers to teachers to the media—would undercut their religious and moral convictions. In a word, orthodox religionists have come to see the family as the first line of defense against a larger culture they see as debased and debasing.

Before I can examine the relationship between religion and parenting, I must define good parenting at greater length. As noted earlier, psychological theory suggests that an authoritative style of parenting, characterized by high levels of warmth and sufficient discipline, is best for children. Specifically, an affectionate approach to parenting is important for engendering self-respect and social competence among children, and for minimizing the likelihood of anxiety and antisocial behavior among children. But this affectionate approach must also be supplemented with a firm approach to discipline where parents set limits and rules for their children and back those expectations up with consistent rewards and sanctions. Children who benefit from this warm but firm style of parenting do better on a range of different social and psychological outcomes—from juvenile delinquency to depression (Baumrind 1971; Chase-Lansdale and Pittman 2002; Maccoby and Martin 1983).

There are also three important social-structural dimensions that foster good parenting: family structure, intergenerational closure, and the quantity of time that parents spend with their

children. Children benefit from ties with significant adults—especially their parents—that extend over time and are characterized by high levels of interaction. Such ties give parents countless opportunities to influence their children and to attend to the ongoing religious, moral, social, and intellectual development of their children. They also provide parents with a long-term horizon that makes them more likely to attend to the long-term interests of their children and a retrospective view of their children that allows them to link events in the child's past to their present behavior and outlook (Coleman 1990).

This is one of the reasons that family structure is so important. Generally, in cases of divorce and out-of-wedlock birth, one parent, typically the father, stops having regular contact with his or her children a few years after the divorce or out-of-wedlock birth (Cooksey and Fondell 1996; Furstenberg 1988; Popenoe 1996). Accordingly, this parent loses the long-term, day-in-day-out perspective and contact with his or her child that is so helpful in fostering good parenting. Furthermore, single parents tend to have less affectionate interaction with their children and provided less firm and consistent discipline as compared to parents in an intact, married family, largely because of the stresses associated with single parenthood. These two factors help to explain why children who grow up outside an intact, married family are less likely to benefit from the authoritative parenting of two parents and, consequently, face a higher risk of range of negative psychological and social outcomes (Amato and Rivera 1999; Carlson 1999; Chase-Lansdale and Pittman 2002; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; McLanahan and Carlson 2002).

The structure of the ties that parents have with other adults and children in their children's social world is also very important. Children benefit from intergenerational closure in their social networks (Coleman 1990). In this case, closure means that parents know who their children are friends with, and they know the adults who their children spend time with outside

the home. Such closure allows their parents (1) to stay abreast of developments in their children's lives and (2) to reinforce norms by monitoring their children's peer groups and by relying on other adults in their social network to support their values. Children who have parents who can rely on their social networks to reinforce their beliefs are more virtuous (Chase-Lansdale and Pittman 2002; Hagan, MacMillan, and Wheaton 1996).

The depth of ties between parent and child is integral to establishing a child's sense of self-respect and a child's identification with the virtues and values espoused by his or her parents. Although the quality of the time that parents spend with their children is important, it is also important for parents to spend a high quantity of time with their children. This time allows parents to interact with their children in a wide range of settings and circumstances, to monitor the behavior and development of their children in a consistent manner, and to develop a "secure attachment" with their children over the lifecourse. For these reasons, greater parental involvement is associated with a range of positive outcomes for children (Amato 1998; Amato and Booth 1998; Chase-Lansdale and Pittman 2002; Hagan, MacMillan, and Wheaton 1996).

RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE ABOUT PARENTING

The parenting advice found in most religious traditions promotes, in the main, the virtues and the values that are conducive to an authoritative parenting style and to a good social environment for parenting. Furthermore, a close reading of evangelical Protestant advice books does not suggest that fathers are encouraged to take a distant, "stereotypical" approach to parenting. The following citations from traditional Catholic, conservative Protestant, and Orthodox Jewish sources are indicative of the general tenor of religious parenting advice, especially among orthodox religious groups in the U.S.

In *Lifeline*, James Stenson, a traditional Catholic, argues that parents must make considerable sacrifices if they seek to raise children who are virtuous and faithful. They must demonstrate to their children that they are capable of living out virtues such as faith, fortitude, and temperance, and they must teach those virtues to their children. In his words:

[T]here seems to be an economic law in children's upbringing: You either pay now or you pay later. Parents who sacrifice to live these virtues themselves, and lead their children to do the same, can later see their children grow into exceptional men and women, the delight of their parents' later lives. But those parents ... who neglect their children's character formation throughout childhood, can spend their later lives in bitter disappointment. This happens all too often. Just look around you. (Stenson 1996: 28-29)

Moreover, in Stenson's view, the stakes that parents face are particularly profound because parenting plays a crucial role in setting children on a path to Heaven or Hell. Accordingly, he argues that God will hold parents accountable for the job they did in raising their children: "God calls every parent to responsibility. He will hold you answerable for the eternal destiny of your children." (Stenson 1996: 17) Thus, not only does Stenson encourage a sacrificial ethic among parents, but he also invests that ethic with transcendent significance of the utmost importance.

James Dobson, president of Focus on the Family, is the most prominent parenting expert in the conservative Protestant world. He draws on his doctoral training in child development and his evangelical faith to advocate an approach to parenting that combines a strict approach to discipline with an affectionate approach to non-disciplinary situations. For instance, in *The Strong-Willed Child*, Dobson writes:

Healthy parenthood can be boiled down to those two essential ingredients, love and control, operating in a system of checks and balances. Any concentration on love to the exclusion of control usually breeds disrespect and contempt. Conversely, an authoritarian and oppressive home atmosphere is deeply resented by the child who feels unloved or even hated. To repeat, the objective for the toddler years is to strike a balance between mercy and justice, affection and authority, love and control. (1978: 61)

As this quote suggests, Dobson supports an approach to parenting that seems to conform largely to the authoritative style of parenting advocated by leading developmental psychologists like Diana Baumrind. However, drawing upon biblical teaching about discipline and parental authority (e.g., Prov. 13:24; Eph. 6:1), Dobson has also been a vocal advocate for the parental use of corporal punishment, especially in cases where young children are being disobedient. His support of corporal punishment, and parental authority more generally, has led many scholars to suspect that his advice, and the advice offered by other conservative Protestant experts, promotes an authoritarian approach to parenting.

It is important to note, however, that Dobson and other experts in this subculture argue that spanking should be applied judiciously and that parents should refrain from angry outbursts that, in their view, harm children and undermine children's respect for their parents' authority. In Dobson's (1992: 36) words: "Parents often use anger to get action instead of using action [spanking] to get action [compliance]... Trying to control children by screaming is as utterly futile as trying to steer a car by honking the horn." Moreover, Dobson (1978: 29-30) also argues that parents most important disciplinary responsibility is to set clear and consistent rules for their children: "The most important step in any disciplinary procedure is to establish reasonable expectations and boundaries in advance. ... Once a child understands what is expected, he should

then be held accountable for behaving accordingly.” Only when children engage in “willful defiance” are they to be spanked (1978: 37). Thus, conservative Protestant experts do not offer parents an indiscriminate license to engage in abusive parenting behavior; rather, they encourage parents to adopt a strict approach to parenting that encompasses clear rules, strong expectations of obedience, and a willingness to rely on spanking but not yelling.

Orthodox Jewish leaders also offer extensive parenting advice to Jewish parents. Two passages from a parenting column written by Rabbi Y.Y. Rubinstein of Ezras Torah Yeshiva are suggestive of this advice genre. In the first selection, he quotes from a nineteenth-century Jewish text that stresses the importance of parental oversight:

And as for you, Jewish parents, do not forget that it was at the time when you were young that the decline began. Sin has made giant steps since you were young; keep guard over your children! Some already move in the direction of this sin in the tenth, ninth, eighth year. Test the schools, the playmates, the servants, the friends of the house! Know that vice enters into the circle of youth by every way. Become the friends of your children! Give them early warning! Stand by their side in their battle! (Rubinstein 2002)

Here Rubinstein is making the point that parents need to monitor the children and adults that their children spend time with so as to protect them from engaging in practices that Judaism deems immoral. Later, Rubinstein warns parents that they must treat their spouse with love and affection, and that they must do all they can to avoid divorce. He argues that the quality and the stability of Jewish marriages is enormously consequential for the happiness of Jewish children:

When I see young people who are in bad shape religiously or emotionally I always wonder “What is the home like?” Often “Unhappy” kids are the products of “Unhappy” parents... The greatest gift that we can give our children is a happy home. The Torah provides the advice to make that ambition a reality. (Rubinstein 2002)

In sum, the family-related discourse produced by orthodox religious groups exhorts parents to high levels of parental affection, involvement, and oversight, and also urges them to take a strict approach to discipline. These religious traditions also stress the importance of marital stability, which has important effects on parenting. Most importantly, this religious discourse imbues the parenting enterprise with transcendent significance. But what impact, if any, does this religiously-grounded discourse have on parenting behaviors? I turn to this question in the next section.

DATA ANALYSIS

The empirical analysis is based on data taken from two different surveys—the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH), sponsored by the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and the Survey of Adults and Youth (SAY), sponsored by Princeton, Columbia, and New York Universities. The NSFH surveyed more than 13,000 adults in 1987-1988, and offers extensive information on a range of religious, economic, demographic, and family matters (Sweet, Bumpass, and Call 1988). The NSFH analysis relies on a subsample of 5300 respondents who were parents of school-age children (aged 5-18). SAY, which oversampled residents in urban and suburban America, surveyed more than 6000 parents and adolescents (aged 10-18) in 1998-1999. SAY incorporates information on a range of sociocultural phenomena; SAY also is the first parenting survey to ask respondents detailed information about their religious identity

(Center for Research on Child Wellbeing 2002). Taken together, these surveys provide a good portrait of the influence that religion has on parenting.

I turn first to the data and results from the NSFH. The empirical analysis is based on logistic regression models that provide estimates of the impact of religion on a range of parenting outcomes, after controlling for relevant socioeconomic factors. For the NSFH, I conducted separate analyses of fathers and mothers in an effort to evaluate the charges of “patriarchal” and “stereotypical” behavior directed against conservative Protestant men.

For independent variables, I focused on two religious measures. To construct a measure of theological conservatism, I used a two-item scale based on respondents’ agreement with the following statements: (1) “The Bible is God’s word and everything happened or will happen exactly as it says” and (2) “The Bible is the answer to all important human problems.” The 41 percent of parents who responded with agreement to both of these statements were coded as theological conservatives—most of whom are conservative Protestants. Because the NSFH did not ask questions about specifically Catholic or Jewish beliefs, I am not able to determine how religious orthodoxy in these two traditions influences parenting using this survey. Parents were also asked how often they attended church. The 35 percent of parents who indicated that they attend church once a week or more than once a week were coded as weekly attendees.

The four dependent variables are based on the following questions. Parents were asked how often they spanked their child, how often they yelled at their child, and how often they praised and hugged their child. Responses ranged from 1-“never” to 4-“very often.” Parents were also asked how often they participated in a range of one-on-one activities (from reading with their child to taking their child on outings). Responses ranged from 1-“never or rarely” to 6-“almost everyday.” I then divided the parents into two groups: those who scored in the top-third (or, in the case of praising and hugging, the top-half) of the relevant measure and those who did

not. (Because spanking and yelling are viewed as negative behaviors, they are reverse-coded). Thus, Figures 1 through 4 indicate whether or not theologically-conservative fathers and mothers are more or less likely to end up in the top-third of the parenting population in the measure under study.

Figure 1 indicates that theologically-conservative fathers and mothers are both less likely than other parents to end up in the top third of parents who report never spanking their school-age children. Theologically-conservative mothers are 23 percent less likely to end up in this group than other mothers, and theologically-conservative fathers are 25 percent less likely to end up in this group than other fathers. A similar pattern emerges among the weekly attending parents, where weekly-attending mothers are 27 percent less likely to end up in this group than other mothers and weekly-attending fathers are 25 percent less likely than other mothers to end up in this group. Thus, Figure 1 indicates that parents who are theologically-conservative or weekly attendees are significantly more likely than other parents to resort to spanking when it comes to disciplining their children. This would seem to offer some evidence in support of the thesis that conservative Protestant parents, and religious parents more generally, are authoritarian parents.

Figure 2 shows that theological conservatism and weekly church attendance is associated with lower rates of yelling on the part of both mothers and fathers of school-age children. Theologically-conservative fathers and mothers are, respectively, 33 and 46 percent more likely to end up in the top third of parents who report never or seldom yelling at their children. Likewise, fathers and mothers who attend church at least once a week are, respectively, 60 and 41 percent more likely to be in the group of parents who rarely yell. These findings run contrary to the authoritarian thesis, because they show that conservative Protestant parents, and religious

parents more generally, are less likely to resort to the angry verbal outbursts that are associated with abusive, authoritarian parenting.

Figure 3 indicates that theologically-conservative and weekly-attending parents are significantly more likely to report praising and hugging their school-age children. Specifically, fathers and mothers who are theologically conservative are, respectively, 29 and 27 percent more likely than other parents to be among the top half of parents who report praising and hugging their children very often. Fathers and mothers who attend church at least once a week are, respectively, 45 and 28 percent more likely than low-attending parents to end up in this group. These findings also run contrary to the authoritarian thesis, insofar as they show that theologically-conservative and high-attending parents are more affectionate with their children than are other parents.

Figure 4 shows that weekly-attending parents are significantly more likely to end up among the top third of parents who report the most one-on-one interaction with their school-age children. Specifically, fathers and mothers who attend church at least once a week are, respectively, 41 and 37 percent more likely than other parents to be highly involved with their children. Theologically-conservative fathers, but not mothers, are also 39 percent more likely than other fathers to be highly involved with their children. Thus, Figure 4 provides additional evidence that conservative Protestantism and church attendance are not associated with an authoritarian approach to parenting.

Taken together, Figures 1 through 4 suggest that conservative Protestant parents, as well as religious parents in general, come closer to approximating an authoritative approach to parenting rather than an authoritarian approach. Although they are more likely to use corporal punishment, they are less likely to yell at their school-age children and more likely to praise and hug their children. Theologically-conservative fathers are also more likely to be involved in one-

on-one activities with their school-age children. Thus, the NSFH suggests that religiously-active and theologically-conservative parents combine a strict but controlled approach to discipline with a warm, engaged style of parenting in non-disciplinary situations.

Figures 1 through 4 also provide little evidence that conservative Protestant men take a “patriarchal” and “stereotypical” approach to parenting that distances them from their children. Indeed, theologically-conservative and high-attending fathers are more involved and expressive with their school-age children than other fathers. Although they spank their children more often than other fathers, they also yell at them less often. Thus, in many ways, high-attending and theologically-conservative fathers come closer to approximating the iconic “new man” than do other fathers.

The Survey of Adults and Youth allows us to broaden this empirical portrait of religion and parenting by incorporating detailed religious identity measures for Jews and Catholics, as well as Protestants. In the logistic regression results that follow, parents who indicate a religious identity are compared to those who indicate no religious identity. I also compare parents who attend religious services weekly to those who do not. The analyses control for a range of factors—from education to race—that might otherwise confound the relationship between religion and parenting. Most of the results examine the likelihood that a parent of a particular religious background will end up in the top third of parents in the relevant outcome.

With respect to independent variables, I relied on parent reports of religious identity and religious attendance. Specifically, parents were asked to report their religious identity, if any, from “evangelical Protestant” to “Orthodox Jew.” I used their self-identifications to classify parents into the following religious groups: conservative Protestant (which includes self-described “evangelical” or “fundamentalist” Protestants), black Protestants, mainline Protestants, liberal Protestants, traditional Catholics, “just” Catholics, liberal Catholics, Orthodox Jews,

Conservative Jews, Reform Jews, and no religious identity.¹ Parents who reported attending religious services once a week or more were coded as weekly attendees.

I focus on four dependent variables in SAY. First, I rely on demographic information to determine whether or not the adolescents in the survey were living in an intact, married family at the time of the survey. Second, to tap intergenerational closure, I relied on three questions posed to adolescents asking them if their parents knew their friends and the parents of their friends and had some kind of regular contact with them. The third variable measures the extent to which parents set rules for seven different areas—from television to chores. The fourth variable measures parental involvement in five different domains—from homework help to sports.

Figure 5 indicates that religion is generally associated with family stability. Specifically, parents of adolescents who attend religious services weekly are 88 percent more likely to live in intact, married family than those who do not attend weekly. Moreover, virtually all parents who indicate a religious identity are more likely to live in an intact family, compared to parents who indicate no religious identity. Figure 5 indicates that traditional Catholics, Reform Jews, and Orthodox Jews are especially likely to live in an intact family. These parents are, respectively, 172 percent, 251 percent, and 439 percent more likely than non-religious parents to live in an intact family. Thus, Figure 5 suggests that religious parents are more likely to offer their children the benefit of growing up in an intact, married home. Figure 5 also indicates that the most orthodox parents from each tradition—i.e., conservative Protestants, traditional Catholics, and Orthodox Jews—score higher than other parents in their religious tradition.

Figure 6 shows that parents of adolescents who attend church or synagogue weekly are 32 percent more likely than other parents to score in the top third of intergenerational closure.

¹ Parents who identified themselves as “secular Jews” were no different than parents who identified themselves as “no religious identity” in the analyses that follow. Thus, I included secular Jews in the none category, which is also

This means that they are more likely to know and have contact with their children's friends and the parents of their children's friends. Likewise, traditional Catholics and Orthodox Jews are, respectively, 25 and 478 percent more likely to score high on intergenerational closure. Thus, high-attending parents, as well as traditional Catholic and Orthodox Jewish parents, seem better able to monitor and control the social environment of their children. So, Figure 6 indicates that attendance and orthodoxy are, once again, associated with a superior parenting environment.

Figure 7 indicates that parents who attend weekly are 29 percent more likely to register in the top-third of parental rule-setters. This means that such parents set rules for their adolescents in more domains than other parents. Furthermore, conservative and liberal Protestant parents are, respectively, 24 and 32 percent more likely than parents with no religious identity to score in the top-third of rule-setters. By contrast, parents from the Reform Jewish tradition are 51 percent less likely to end up in this group. This means that high-attending parents, conservative Protestant parents, and liberal Protestant parents are more likely than most parents to set rules for their adolescents, while Reform Jews are less likely to set rules for their teenagers. Thus, Figure 7 suggests that Protestant parents are more inclined to rely on rules, which is in keeping with the classical Protestant focus on parental authority.

Figure 8 shows that parents who attend weekly are 80 percent more likely than other parents to score in the top third in the SAY measure of parental involvement. This means that they spend more time in activities like homework help, volunteering with their teenage children, and playing sports with them. Figure 8 also shows that conservative Protestant, black Protestant, traditional Catholic, just Catholic, and Orthodox Jewish parents are more involved with their children than non-religious parents. Once again, orthodox parents are the most involved parents in their respective traditions. Specifically, conservative Protestant, traditional Catholic, and

the comparison category. These analyses do not include parents who indicated an Islamic, Mormon, or other

Orthodox Jewish parents are, respectively, 50 percent, 66 percent, and 404 percent more likely to score in the top third of parental involvement.

In general, Figures 5 through 8 reveal that religious orthodoxy and attendance is associated with significantly higher investments in parenting and with better parenting environments. Parents who attend church or synagogue weekly scored consistently higher on every parenting outcome. The most orthodox religious groups—conservative Protestants, traditional Catholics, and Orthodox Jews—were also more likely to score positively on the various dimensions of parental social capital. This means that high-attending and orthodox religious parents are more likely than other parents to provide their children with stable and closed social ties, high levels of social control, and an intense parenting style. However, it is interesting to note that conservative Protestant parents do seem to approach discipline differently than traditional Catholics and Orthodox Jews. Conservative Protestants rely on rules more, perhaps in keeping with their history of legalistic individualism. By contrast, traditional Catholics and Orthodox Jews rely more on closed social networks, that is, they exercise control over their children by making sure they are associating with the right crowd.

CONCLUSION

This essay suggests that parents who are deeply religious—that is, who hold orthodox religious beliefs and practice their faith regularly—stand a better chance of creating the kind of home environment and practicing the parental virtues that promote character in their children. On average, they make considerable sacrifices to spend time with their children, to discipline their children in a spirit of self-control, to keep their marriages together, to deal with their children in an affectionate way, and to oversee their children's social life. Given the fact that virtually every

parenting outcome associated with religious practice and orthodoxy has been shown to have a beneficial effect on children, these sacrifices should translate into higher levels of religious, moral, social, and psychological well-being among children who grow up in religious homes.

The one exception to this trend is that conservative Protestant and high-attending parents are more likely to use corporal punishment, which is generally associated with anti-social behavior and psychological distress (Straus, Sugarman, and Giles-Stims 1997). On the other hand, other studies suggest that corporal punishment only has a negative effect on children when it is combined with low levels of parental affection and involvement (Baumrind 1997; Larzelere 1996). Thus, even on this parenting dimension, the high levels of involvement and affection demonstrated by religious parents may outweigh any negative effects associated with corporal punishment. Thus, I find little evidence to support the thesis articulated by leading family scholars, including John Gottman, that conservative Protestantism—or any other major American religious tradition, for that matter—promotes an authoritarian parenting style characterized by high levels of corporal punishment, low levels of parental warmth, and low levels of parental responsiveness. Indeed, in most respects, highly religious parents, including conservative Protestant parents, come close to approximating the authoritative parenting style generally associated with positive child outcomes.

Indeed, this essay lends additional evidence in support of Coleman's theoretical claim that primordial institutions such as religion play a beneficial role in the lives of children (see also Wilcox 2002). Undoubtedly, the structural features of primordial religious institutions—for example, their social closure and long-term time horizon—play an important role in cultivating the seedbeds of parental virtue. But their strong collective belief-systems also play a central role in motivating parents to sacrifice on behalf of their children. Given their profound interest in transmitting faith from one generation to the next, religious parents recognize that they have to

sacrifice so that their children will embrace their faith as adults. Furthermore, dramatic shifts in our culture have spurred conservative Protestants, traditional Catholics, and Orthodox Jews to rededicate themselves to a family-centered way of life, a way of life that they believe is threatened by secularism, commercialism, and immorality. In a word, religious parents—especially orthodox ones—are attempting to shore up faith and family by focusing on their own families.

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Figure 1: Do Not Spank

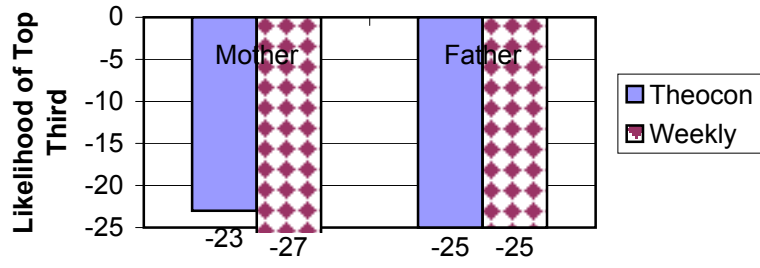
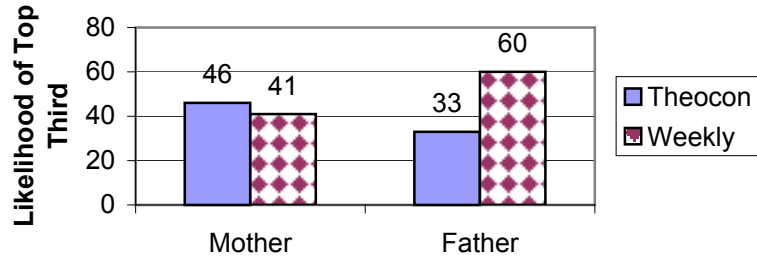
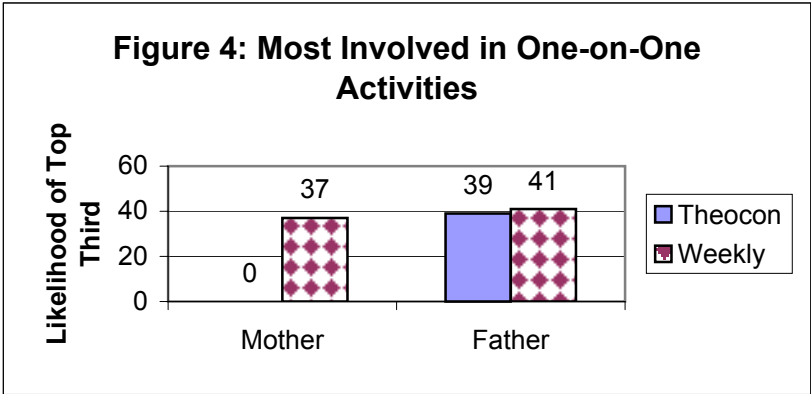
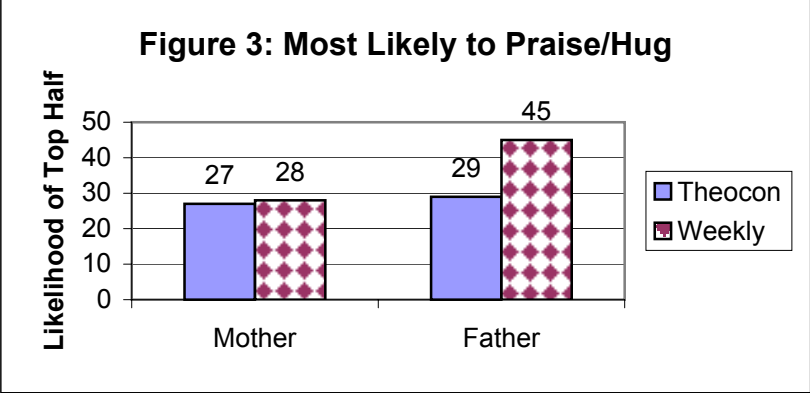


Figure 2: Rarely Yell





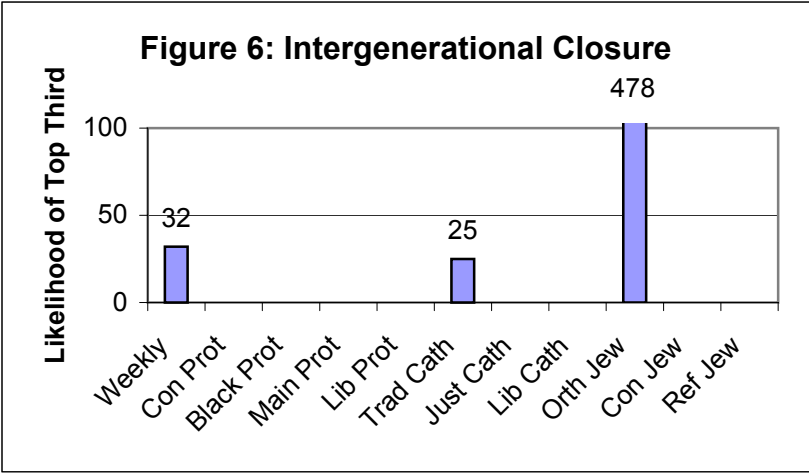
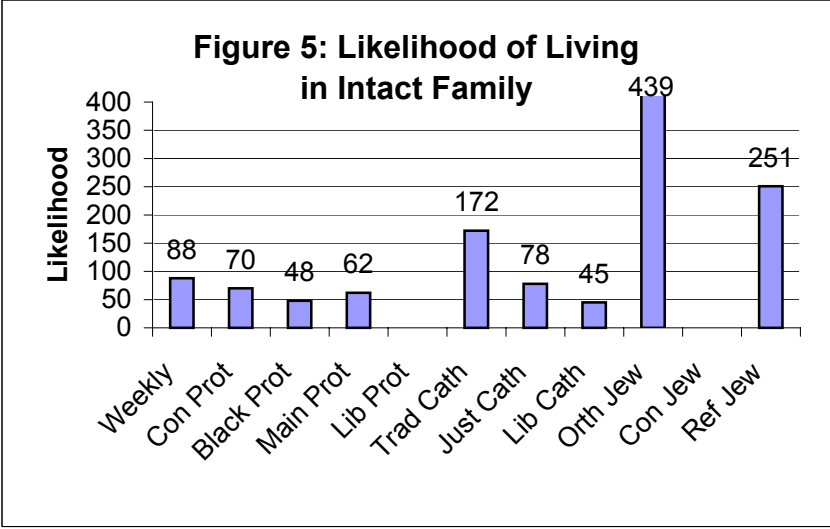


Figure 7: Parental Rules

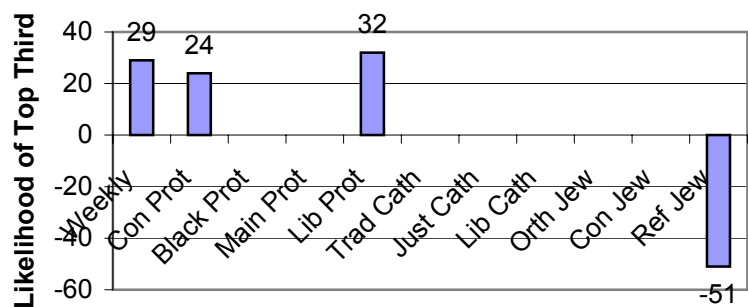


Figure 8: Parental Involvement

