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Living in sin? Religion and cohabitation in Britain 1985-2005

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Living in sin? Religion and cohabitation in Britain 1985-2005

Abstract

Frequency of cohabitation among 13,703 adults from the British Social Attitudes dataset for 1985-2005 peaked at around 26-30 years of age, and increased significantly over the period of study. Cohabitation frequency was compared between those of no religious affiliation and Christian affiliates who (a) attended church at least once a month, (b) attended church, but less than once a month, and (c) never attended church. Active Christians were 3.2 times less likely to cohabit than non-affiliates, and rates of cohabitation have remained stable over time in this group. Christian affiliates who never attended church were 1.2 times less likely to cohabit than non-affiliates, suggesting that even affiliation without attendance may indicate greater affinity to Christian moral attitudes compared with non-affiliates.

Key words: attitudes, Christianity, church attendance, cohabitation, denomination.

The long running debate about secularization and the decline in church attendance in Western Europe has its roots in the nineteenth century work of Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. Secularization theory was developed in the twentieth century by Bryan Wilson (1966) and Peter Berger (1969), and has more recently been championed by Steve Bruce (2002). The theory is complex, but at its core is the idea that religious affiliation has declined in Western Europe because people have become secularized by modernity. This perception of an inevitable decline of religious belief and practice in the face of growing human knowledge, rationality and technology has been vigorously challenged from several directions (Cox, 2003). Some, such as Robin Gill (1993, 2003), have cast doubt on the extent of the decline; others such as Callum Brown (2001) argue that other social forces were more important in leading to the drift from the churches.

Other commentators on the changing religious landscape have argued that the move has been from traditional religiosity to a more nebulous spirituality, rather than to secular unbelief. Gill, Hadaway and Marler (1998) analysed British survey data from the 1920s to the 1990s and concluded there has been a decline in belief in God and in traditional Christian beliefs among the general population, but not a decline in belief in the transcendent. This move from traditional Christian belief to a more general spirituality has been noted by other researchers (e.g. Heelas & Woodhead, 2004), and seems to be gaining widespread acceptance. In this view, most of the population are not affiliated with any organized traditional religion, but hold to a range of beliefs and values that stem from quasi-religious or spiritual worldviews. Estimates suggest that only around 6% of the population of the UK attend church on a given Sunday (Brierley, 2008: figure 12.2.1) and this would seem to support the

notion that traditional religiosity has lost whatever meaning it may once have had for the British population.

Against this background it came as something of a surprise that, when a question on religious affiliation appear in the National Census for the first time in England and Wales in 2001, around 72% of the population chose to affiliate themselves with the Christian religion, rather than to opt for the 'no religion' response (Office for National Statistics, 2004). Was this an empty gesture by a population still reacting instinctively to religious categories by owning a faith that has no meaning in their lives? Or does the act of affiliation, even when unaccompanied by any other sign of belonging, indicate that religious affiliation may yet have some significance for sections of the British population who show little direct signs of following traditional patterns of religious behaviour? One way of testing this is to examine the behaviour or beliefs of this group in comparison with those who either do not affiliate to any religion or who both affiliate and attend worship services.

The changes in religious affiliation and attendance have occurred alongside changes in key indicators of moral attitudes and values such as the frequency of cohabitation outside marriage. Cohabitation has been studied for several decades in Western societies, partly because it seems to indicate changing patterns demography and kinship and partly because it seems to indicate changes in moral values and social taboos. The two main views of cohabitation are that it is either a particular form of courtship (and therefore a prelude to marriage) or an alternative to marriage. However, this simple dichotomy may mask a more complex reality (Seltzer, 2004: 925), and the reasons for cohabiting are complex and may be changing over time (McRae, 1997; Sassler, 2004; Seltzer, 2004). There are different kinds of cohabitation representing the different circumstances of cohabitees: some have never married,

some are separated from their spouse, and some are divorced. Studies in the United States and Europe have indicated a wide range of reasons for cohabiting, which include the desire to spend more time together, testing a relationship, financial benefits, convenience and housing issues (Haskey, 2001b; McRae, 1997; Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009; Sassler, 2004; Seltzer, 2004). As social pressures for couples to marry decline, cohabitation has become less of a prelude to marriage and more of a permanent living arrangement parallel to marriage in which children may be raised (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991; Manting, 1996). In other respects, cohabitation may be an alternative to singleness, rather than an alternative to marriage (Rindfuss & VandenHeuvel, 1990).

Cohabitation rates have increased over the last few decades in both the United States and Europe (Haskey, 1999; Manting, 1996; Seltzer, 2004). In the UK, the proportion of couples that lived together before marrying increased from 2% in the mid 1960s to 70% in the mid 1990s, while the proportion of children born out of wedlock increased from 5% to 35% over the same period (Haskey, 2001a). It is now the norm for couples to marry after what may be a protracted period of living together (Kiernan, 2004). In 2004, for example, 63% of Church of England marriages involved couples who registered the same address at the time of the wedding (Office for National Statistics, 2007). Alongside the change in practice has been a change in attitude, so that by the late 1990s, 64% of people in Britain agreed that it was all right for couples to live together without intending to get married (Haskey, 2001a). The rise in cohabiting corresponded with a decline in marriage: the General Marriage Rate (marriages per 1000 eligible people) fell from around 60 in men and 48 in women in 1980 to around 24 in men and 22 in women in 2005.

The changes in Britain are seen elsewhere in Europe and in the United States (Kiernan, 2002; Manting, 1996; Seltzer, 2004). Although the causes, nature, extent and consequences of cohabitation may vary between cultures and over time, it is likely that ubiquitous increase in frequency in the West since the 1960s is at least partly linked to changes in attitudes toward couples having sexual relationships outside marriage. Religion has been identified as an important source of attitudes and values that might oppose the move away from marriage to cohabitation. Several observers have noted the declining influence of religion on cohabitation in Europe (Kiernan, 2002; Manting, 1996): this paper examines whether religion is still associated with a reluctance to cohabit, even in a country such as Britain, where church attendance rates are very low.

The National Centre for Social Research has been running annual surveys of social attitudes in Britain since 1983. The surveys use personal interviews of a random sample of adults from England, Wales and Scotland. Questions on religious and denominational affiliation have been included since the survey began and information on marital status has been collected in the same way since 1985. Williams and Francis (in press) examined the British Social Attitudes survey data from 1983 to 2005, and demonstrated an overall link between religious affiliation and cohabitation. The highest level of cohabitation was among those classified as having no religious affiliation (19%), followed by those who never practice (10%), those who attend once or twice a year (6%), and those who attend weekly (2%). The implication is that as affiliation declines, cohabitation is likely to increase.

The broad association between levels of cohabitation and indices of religious affiliation and religious practice is consistent with the findings from a range of other studies. For example, the link between self-assigned religious affiliation and

cohabitation was supported by Dempsey and de Vaus (2004), drawing on data from Australia. According to this study, those who reported no religious affiliation were the most likely to cohabit, and Anglicans were more likely to cohabit than those affiliated with other Christian denominations. The link between self-reported religious practice and cohabitation was supported by Berrington and Diamond (1999), drawing on data from Britain. According to this study, 42% of men and 36% of women who reported no religious attendance and 32% of men and 29% of women who reported weak religious attendance had cohabited, compared with 17% of men and 18% of women who reported strong religious attendance.

The association between cohabitation and self-assigned religious affiliation reported by Williams and Francis (in press), drawing on data provided by the British Social Attitudes survey between 1983 and 2005, needs to be tested more thoroughly in this dataset. Using overall figures from samples collected over a 20-year period may mask or exaggerate associations because levels of cohabitation are age dependent and have varied between cohorts born at different times. This paper examines the association between different types of Christian affiliation and attendance and cohabitation within the British Social Attitudes Survey data over a 20-year period. The aim is to assess more accurately the size of effects associated with religious affiliation and attendance after allowing for sex, age and changes over time.

Method

Sample

Questions on marital status and on self-assigned religious affiliation and self-reported religious practice have been included in the British Social Attitudes (BSA) surveys conducted every year since 1983, apart from 1988 and 1992. In the present study

religious effects on cohabitation were tested on a specific subset of the main dataset. Cohabitation is a lifecycle event, showing marked changes with age (Figure 1). In this sample, the proportion of cohabiters increased sharply from age 18 to reach a peak at about 26 - 30 years, before declining sharply. These life cycle patterns were further complicated by differences between cohorts in the absolute levels of cohabitation, which have generally increased during the period of study. Respondents born before 1950 would have been at least 35 when the study began, and none of this cohort was sampled at an age when cohabitation is most frequent. To ensure a fair test of the effects of religiosity on cohabitation, respondents were selected if they were born between 1960 and 1987 and were aged between 17 and 35 when sampled. There were 15,056 people in this subset of the survey dataset. This study uses responses from 13,703 people from the subset who classed their religion as either *no religion* or *Christian* (i.e. excluding non-Christian religious affiliates) and for whom there were valid responses for sex, age, marital status, religious affiliation, and church attendance.

Dependent variables

From 1985, valid answers to marital status were recorded as: *married*, *never married*, *living as married*, *separated or divorced* and *widowed*. Responses were recoded for this study into a dummy variable 'cohabitation' (1 = *living as married*, 0 = *otherwise*).

Independent variables

Sex (1 = *male*, 2 = *female*) was recorded by interviewers and there were no missing values. Age was recorded to the nearest year. Year of survey was coded as 3 = 1985 to 23 = 2005. Possible responses to religious affiliation changed slightly over the

twenty-year period of the study. The main categories identified major religion (or no religion), while Christian affiliates were identified by denomination. From 1989 some additional categories of Christian denomination were coded in the dataset (Free Presbyterian, Brethren and other Protestant). For this study Christian affiliates were assigned to one of four categories: *Church of England*, *Roman Catholic*, *other denomination*, and *no denomination*. The *other denomination* category consisted of Protestant denominations such as Baptist, Methodist and United Reformed Church. A small number of Christian affiliates were not aligned to any denomination: they may have been those who belonged to independent congregations or people who accepted the label Christian but did not identify with any particular church.

Possible responses to church attendance changed slightly during the course of the study. Originally, respondents were asked for their religious affiliation, and those who answered none were not then asked about attendance. In 1989, interviewers also asked about previous affiliation and attendance, so those in the 'no religion' category could indicate their current attendance level. This pattern of questioning was maintained thereafter, apart from 1993, when the pre-1989 pattern was used. For this study, attendance was classed as *never* = no religion or Christian affiliates who never attended, *casual* = less than monthly, and *frequent* = monthly or more. A small number from some years who answered 'no religion' but indicated that they did attend occasionally were excluded from this analysis.

Responses for religious affiliation and attendance were combined to make the independent variable 'religious status.' This had the following values: 1 = *no religion* (no religious affiliation), 2 = *Christian non attendance* (Christian affiliates who never attended), 3 = *Christian casual attendance* (Christian affiliates who attended less than monthly), and 4 = *Christian frequent attendance* (Christian affiliates who attended

monthly or more). Classifying in this way allowed Christian affiliates who never attended church to be treated separately from either those who never attended because they were not affiliated or those who were affiliated and attended.

Analysis

Multivariate logistic regression analyses were applied to the cohabitation variable testing first for associations with religious status and then for associations with Christian denomination. For religious status the control variables were sex, age and year. For Christian denominations the control variables were sex, age, year, and attendance. An age squared (centred) term was included in both models to allow for the decline in cohabitation with age. The main interest was testing for the significance of effects and comparing the size of effects using the odds ratio.

Results

[Table 1 about here]

The frequencies of cohabitation in different categories of the independent variables are shown in Table 1. The proportion of cohabiters varied significantly between years, after allowing for the effects of all other variables in the model (Table 2). This is in line with widespread observation of increasing rates of cohabitation since the 1980s. The proportion of cohabiters in the sample was highly significantly associated with religious status after allowing for sex, age, and year effects. The odds ratios indicated that, compared to those who self defined as no religion, Christian affiliates who never attended were 1.2 times less likely to cohabit; Christian casual attendees were 1.5 times less likely to cohabit, and Christian frequent attendees 3.2 times less

likely to cohabit. All of these differences were significant at least at the 1% level of probability.

[Table 2 about here]

The trends over time were apparent in all groups apart from actively attending Christian affiliates, where the proportion cohabiting remained fairly stable over the twenty years of the survey (Figure 2). Other Christian affiliates remained less likely than non-religious affiliates to cohabit, but showed parallel increases over time.

After excluding the 7,990 non-affiliates, for the smaller sample of 5713 Christian affiliates, denominational differences were also apparent after allowing for sex, age, year, and attendance. Those classed as *other* were 1.7 times less likely to cohabit than those in the Church of England (Table 3). There were no significant differences in the odds of cohabiting between Roman Catholics and those affiliated to the Church of England, and this was also true for those Christian affiliates who did not specify a denomination.

[Table 3 about here]

Discussion

The decline in religious affiliation and the increase in cohabitation in Britain were demonstrated by Williams and Francis (in press) in an earlier analysis of the dataset used in the present study. What this new study has done is to interrogate the association, and attempt to remove confounding effects that result from the age spectra of different cohorts in the overall sample. By confining analysis to particular cohorts and age groups, any effects of religiosity can be assessed with greater confidence. From this analysis several important points arise.

The first point concerns the general increase in cohabitation over the period since the British Social Attitudes survey began in the mid-1980s. The peak in age-related frequency of cohabitation in this sample increased from just over 10% in the late 1980s to over 25% in the first five years of the 2000s. There is also some suggestion in these figures that the peak has occurred slightly later in life as the survey progressed, being around age 23 in the early 1990s and age 26 in the last six years of the data currently analysed. This is in line with the observation from national statistics that suggests the age at which people first married increased during this period. The decline in cohabitation for people in their thirties coincides with a rise in the proportion that is married. More tolerant attitudes towards cohabiting, and different patterns of marriage seem to be contributing to a much greater frequency of cohabiting behaviour among those in their late twenties in Great Britain.

The second point to emerge concerns the much lower frequency of cohabitation among Christian affiliates who frequently attend church. This group was over three times less likely to cohabit than non-religious affiliates, and significantly less likely to cohabit than Christian affiliates who attended less than once a month. Although casual attending and non-attending Christian affiliates increased in frequency of cohabitation in line with increases among non-religious affiliates over the period of the survey, this was not so among frequent attendees, who seemed to resist the national trends. The most likely explanation is that this group is strongly committed to the Church's traditional teaching on sexual relationships outside marriage. More work would be needed to explore whether this is related to individual belief systems, to the socialising effects of church congregations, or to a combination of these factors. What is important to note is that the gap between this group and the rest of society seems to be increasing as time goes on.

A third point to emerge concerns the slight but significant effect of Christian affiliation on cohabitation, even when this is not accompanied by any attendance at church. Although the difference between this group and non-affiliates was slight (1.2 times less likely to cohabit) it was statistically significant and persisted over time. While most affiliates who did not attend church seemed to behave as non-affiliates, a small number did seem to maintain behaviour that is more typical of active Christians. This suggests that self-reported affiliation has some residual meaning (at least in terms of this particular behaviour) even if affiliation is not supported by participation in church worship. These may be people who attended churches earlier in life and who have carried with them some trace of the beliefs and values of those churches. This is perhaps supported by the fact that cohabitation rates for non-attendees affiliated to the 'other' denominations were around 10%, which was around 5% lower than for the other denominations, and markedly lower than non-affiliates. Adherents to these mainly Protestant denominations were generally less likely to cohabit, and this seems to have persisted to a considerable degree, even among those who did not attend.

Whether the effect of religious status on cohabitation is a direct effect of Christian moral values about sex outside marriage creating reluctance to enter into a cohabiting relationship is not clear from these data. Religious status may indicate more general beliefs about commitment and fidelity that make marriage a more attractive option than cohabitation. Although the situation may be changing, most studies have found that cohabiting relationships tend not to last for more than a few years (Bumpass & Lu, 2000; Murphy, 2000; Seltzer, 2004). Religious people might find marriage is a better way than cohabitation to express their desire for a long-term commitment to another person. Alternatively, the greater proportion of religious

people among married than cohabiting couples might reflect a coincidental selection for people likely to enter into such relationships. Axin and Thorton (1992) found that a greater divorce rate among American married couples that previously cohabited compared with those that married without cohabiting may have reflected the fact that cohabiting is selective of couples who are less committed to marriage and more approving of divorce. The negative association of religion and cohabitation might, by analogy, arise because individual characteristics that foster religious association also foster marital rather than cohabiting associations.

The same negative association between religion and cohabitation would arise if cohabitation caused people to lose their religious faith because of disapproval from the religious community. Although this might apply to those who attend church frequently, it would not explain why non-attending affiliates have lower cohabitation rates than non-religious people because it is unlikely that either group would be in situations where they would experience social pressure to separate or marry. It is possible that affiliation, beliefs, values and behaviour are related independently to other variables such as social or economic status. This will need to be tested by studies that could rule out this possibility, though it is unlikely that social economic status has been an important factor in influencing cohabitation in the UK (Kiernan, 2002).

What these data do indicate is that, when it comes to the nature of intimate relationships, religious affiliates may form a distinct group within British society. Even those who self-affiliate but never attend may have a slightly different pattern of behaviour from those who do not affiliate to any religion. 'Meaningless affiliation' is not without some meaning.

Table 1

Percentage Cohabiting by Independent Variables

	Cohabiting	
	%	<i>n</i>
Sex		
Male	14.8	5991
Female	14.5	7712
Age		
17-25	13.7	5711
26-30	16.9	4128
31-35	13.6	3864
Year		
1985-89	7.4	1883
1990-94	12.0	2922
1995-99	14.9	3677
2000-05	18.6	5221
Attendance		
Never	16.4	10481
Casual attendance	11.6	1701
Frequent attendance	5.9	1521
Religious status		
No religion	17.1	7990
Christian non attendance	14.3	2491
Christian casual attendance	11.6	1701
Christian frequent attendance	5.9	1521

Christian denomination

Church of England	12.1	2568
Roman Catholic	12.8	1392
Other denomination	6.4	857
No denomination	11.2	896

Table 2

Multiple Logistic Regression Analysis of Cohabitation (N = 13703)

	Category	B	S.E.	Wald	OR
Sex	Female	0.00	0.05	0.00	1.00
Age		0.00	0.01	0.35	1.00
Age squared		-0.01	0.00	144.97	0.99***
Year		0.07	0.00	183.22	1.07***
Religious status					
	Christian non attending	-0.17	0.07	6.59	0.85**
	Christian casual attendance	-0.41	0.08	24.39	0.67***
	Christian frequent attendance	-1.17	0.11	104.59	0.31***

Note: OR = Odds Ratio. Reference categories for categorical variables were sex: male, religious status: no religion.

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 3

Multiple Logistic Regression Analysis of Cohabitation by Denomination (N = 5713)

	Category	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	Wald	OR
Sex	Female	-0.03	0.09	0.08	0.97
Age		-0.02	0.01	3.54	0.98
Age squared		-0.01	0.00	44.42	0.99***
Year		0.07	0.01	64.45	1.07***
Attendance		-0.43	0.06	53.92	0.65***
Religious status					
	Roman Catholic	0.16	0.11	2.39	1.18
	Other denomination	-0.52	0.16	11.29	0.59***
	No denomination	-0.17	0.13	1.76	0.84

Note: OR = Odds Ratio. Reference categories for categorical variables were sex: male, denomination: Church of England.

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Figure 1

Cohabitation by Age for Different Years of Sampling

Figure 2

Cohabitation by Year Group of Sampling for Differing Religious Status

Figure 1

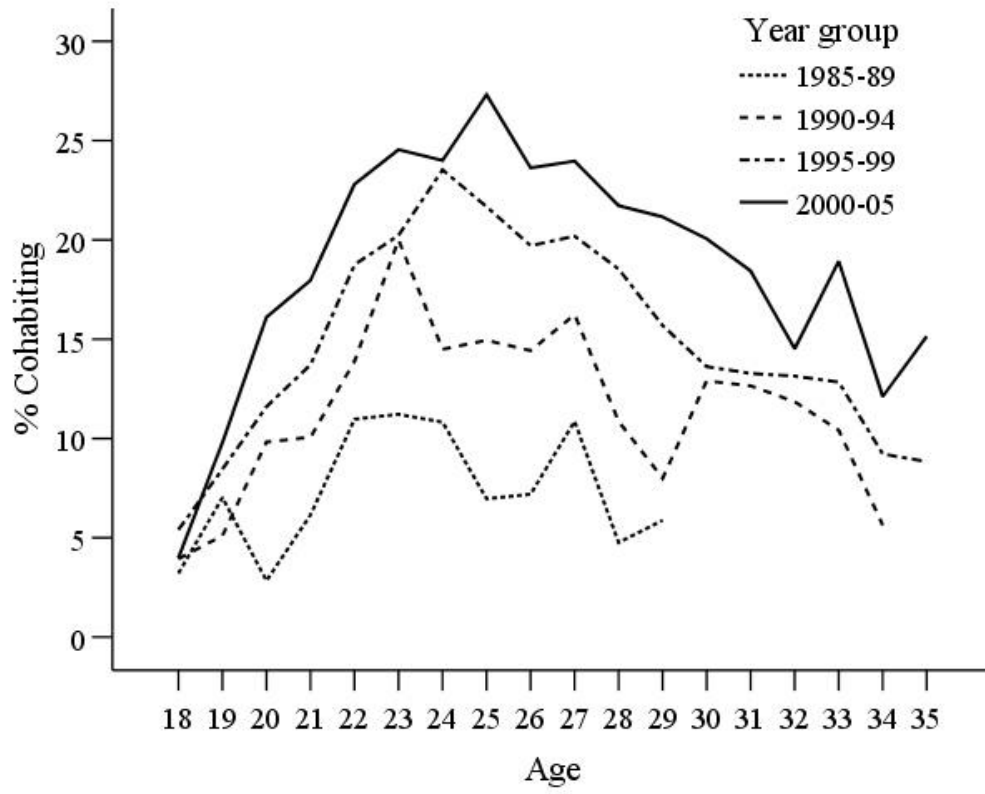
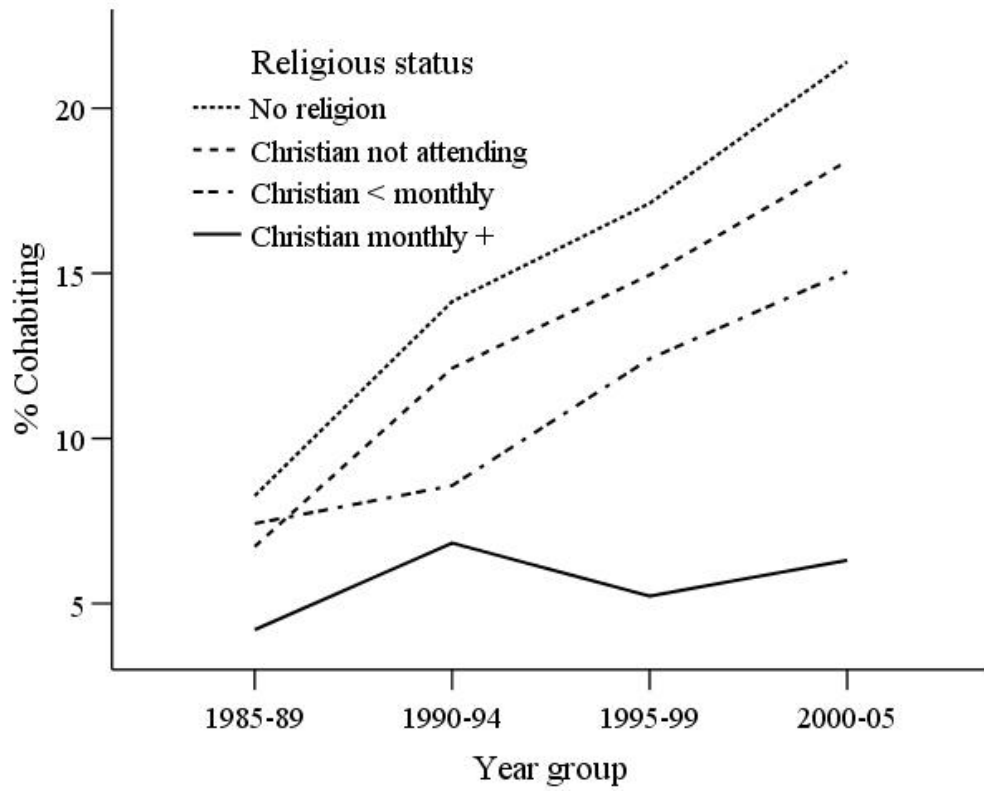


Figure 2



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