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Author(s): Andrew Village; Emyr Williams; Leslie J. Francis

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Does religion make a difference? Assessing the effects of Christian affiliation and practice on marital solidarity and divorce in Britain, 1985-2005

Andrew Village

Senior Lecturer in Practical and Empirical Theology,

York St John University, York YO31 7EX, UK

Email: a.village@yorks.ac.uk

Emyr Williams

Research Fellow

Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit

University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK

Email: Emyr.Williams@warwick.ac.uk

Leslie J Francis

Professor of Religions and Education,

Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit,

University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL, UK

Email: leslie.francis@warwick.ac.uk

Date submitted:

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Abstract

Marital breakdown rates were examined among 15,714 adults from the British Social Attitudes dataset for 1985-2005. Separation and divorce peaked at around 50 years of age, and increased significantly over the period of study. Ratios of separation or divorce were compared between respondents who had no religious affiliation and (a) Christian affiliates who attended church at least once a month, (b) Christian affiliates who attended church, but less than once a month, and (c) Christian affiliates who never attended church. The results showed that active Christians were 1.5 times less likely to suffer marital breakdown than non-affiliates, but there was no difference between affiliates who never attended church and those of no religion. Christians who attended infrequently were 1.3 times less likely to suffer marital breakdown compared to non-affiliates, suggesting that even infrequent attendance at church may have some significance for predicting the persistence of marital solidarity.

Key words: attitudes, Christianity, church attendance, denomination, divorce, marital breakdown, separation.

Divorce

In Western Europe, legal restrictions on divorce were reduced in the late twentieth century in most countries, leading to increases in the frequency of divorce and remarriage. The UK provides a typical example. The main source of data for marriage and divorce in England and Wales comes from the Office for National Statistics, which collates marriage and divorce returns and publishes annual reports and occasional review papers (Haskey, 1999, 2001). Attitudes are assessed in some regular surveys, such as the General Household Survey (Office of National Statistics, 2000), the British Household Panel Survey (Buck, Gershuny, Rose, & Scott, 1994) and the British Social Attitudes Survey published by the National Centre for Social Research (Babb, Butcher, Church, & Zealey, 2006, Table 4.6; Barlow, Duncan, James, & Park, 2001).

In Britain there were marked changes in the last three decades of the twentieth century, partly due to changes in the law related to marriage and divorce, which made divorce easier. The divorce rate rose steeply in the 1960s and 1970s following changes in legislation, but since the 1980s it has fluctuated between about 12-15 per 1000 of the married population. The result of this over the long term is that around 40% of all marriages now end in divorce, and the proportion of divorcees in the adult population is increasing steadily year on year (Haskey, 1999). The number of remarriages increased sharply with the reform of the divorce laws in 1971, but the number has remained steady since then, with around 37% of all marriages involving divorcees.

Marital solidarity

Changes in the divorce rate may provide insights into much more than the increasing fragility of marriage. Growth in the divorce rate may be indicative of the broader erosion in solidarity, with the ensuing consequences for the personal lives of individuals and for the collective life of society.

Simpson and England's (1980) classic study of the association between conjugal work roles and marital solidarity discussed research employing a range of indicators of marital solidarity, including: indices of marital adjustment (Gover, 1963; Navron, 1967), indices of marital satisfactions (Michel, 1970; Bean, Curtis, & Marcum, 1977; Burke & Weir, 1976; Ferree, 1976; Snyder, 1979) and divorce (Glick & Norton, 1977; Cherlin, 1979). Simpson and England's own composite indicator of marital solidarity comprised four categories of variables: mutuality, marital commitment, marital satisfaction, and family satisfaction. Mutuality was accessed by questions like, 'How well do you think your husband/wife understands you – your feelings, your likes and dislikes, and any problems you may have?' Marital commitment was accessed by questions like, 'Has the thought of getting divorced ever crossed your mind?' Marital satisfaction was accessed by the single question, 'How much satisfaction do you get from your marriage?' Family satisfaction was accessed by the single question, 'How much satisfaction do you get from your family life?' According to Simpson and England's empirical data, the question regarding divorce proved to be a particularly useful indicator of decay in marital solidarity.

In their more recent study of social exchange theory and marital solidarity, Nakonezny and Denton (2008:406) see marital dissolution (divorce) as the culmination of a process in which: interpersonal exchange within the marriage becomes less interdependent; there is less mutual involvement; there is less mutual identification; there is less liking; there is less shared levels of compatibility; there is

less solidarity; and there is progressive withdrawal of love and affection. Again divorce is seen as a particularly useful indicator of decay in marital solidarity.

Divorce and religion

There is a long-established link between religion and both the promotion of marital solidarity in general and the rejection of divorce in particular. The traditional Christian prohibition on divorce is linked to the words of Jesus recorded in the Gospels, where he specifically prohibits it (Mark 10:2-12), apart possibly from cases of marital infidelity (Matthew 5:31-32). Some Christian traditions have held strongly onto this prohibition, even in the face of changing values in society at large. Others have followed the wider changes in society with changes in rules that relate to the acceptance for remarriage in church of those who have previously been divorced.

Several studies have explored the relationship between divorce and self-assigned religious affiliation, and the results suggest that affiliation to Christian denominations is associated with lower rates of divorce. For example, in the classic study of 871 inhabitants of Middletown in the United States of America, Bahr and Chadwick (1985) found that 12% of those who claimed no religious affiliation were divorced, compared with 9% of Protestants and 12% of Catholics. The continuing significance of self-assigned religious affiliation for predicting individual differences in levels of divorce within the Netherlands has been reported by Kalmijn, de Graaf and Janssen (2005) and de Graaf and Kalmijn (2006).

Other studies have explored the relationship between divorce and self-reported church attendance, and the results suggest that church attendance is also associated with lower rates of divorce. For example, in their classic study of Middletown, Bahr and Chadwick (1985) found that 12% of those who never practised were divorced,

compared with 4% of those who attended church at least on a monthly basis. The continuing significance of self-reported church attendance for predicting individual differences in attitudes toward divorce within the United States of America has been reported by Martin and Parashar (2006) drawing on data gathered by the General Social Survey.

In the UK, the British Social Surveys provide some evidence for a decline in religious affiliation and a rise in divorce. The National Centre for Social Research has been running surveys of social attitudes in Britain annually since 1983 (apart from 1988 and 1992). The surveys are based on personal interviews of a random probability sample of adults from England, Wales and Scotland. Questions on religious and denominational affiliation and on religious practice 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 divorce and both religious affiliation and religious practice.

The associations between marital breakdown and both self-assigned religious affiliation and self-reported religious practice need 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 divorce are age dependent and have varied between cohorts born at different times. This paper examines the association between different types of Christian self-assigned religious affiliation or self-reported religious attendance and separation or divorce 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 cohort-related differences.

Method

Procedure

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 divorce were tested on a specific subset of the main dataset. Divorce is a lifecycle event, showing marked changes with age (Figure 1). In this sample, the proportion of those separated or divorced increased sharply from age 18 to reach a peak at about 50 years, before declining sharply. The increase is expected because the category implies prior marriage or cohabitation and these themselves increase among those in their twenties and thirties. The decline is more complex, and may be partly due to remarriage after divorce (a category not used in the BSA surveys) and partly due to cohort-differences in the absolute levels of separation and divorce, which have generally increased during the period of study.

[Figure 1 about here]

To ensure a fair test of the effects of religiosity on separation and divorce a subset of the overall data was used. For separation and divorce, respondents were selected if they were born between 1946 and 1969 and were aged between 35 and 60 when sampled. This study uses responses from 15,714 people from the subset who classed their religion as either 'no religion' or 'Christian' (ie 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 'divorced' (based on 'separated or divorced' = 1, otherwise = 0).

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), 'less than monthly' and '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 divorce variable testing first for associations with religious status and then for associations with Christian denomination. For religious status the control variables were sex, age, age squared and year. For Christian denominations the control variables were sex, age, age squared, year, and attendance. An age squared (centred) term was included in both models to allow for the decline in divorce 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 separation or divorce in different categories of the independent variables are shown in Table 1. Table 2 then employs multiple logistic regression to assess the significance of the independent variables. The proportion of the sample that was separated or divorced varied significantly between years, after allowing for the effects of all other variables in the model. This is in line with widespread observation of increasing rates of divorce since the 1980s. The proportion separated or divorced 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 no more or less likely to be separated or divorced. However, Christian casual attenders were 1.3 times less likely to be separated or divorced, and Christian frequent attenders 1.5 times less likely to be so, compared to non-affiliates. Both of these differences were significant at the 0.1% level of probability.

[Table 2 about here]

The trends over time were apparent in all groups, including actively attending Christian affiliates, where the proportion was consistently lower than other groups, but showed the same rate of increase over time (Figure 2).

[Figure 2 about here]

After excluding the 6,778 non-affiliates, for the smaller sample of 8,936 Christian affiliates, denominational differences were also apparent after allowing for sex, age, year, and attendance. Roman Catholics were 1.4 times more likely to be separated or divorced compared to those who belonged to the Church of England

(Table 3). There was no significant difference between those affiliated with other Christians denominations and those affiliated with the Church of England.

[Table 3 about here]

In both multivariate models, women were significantly more likely to be separated or divorced than men, the difference amounting to 1.68 and 1.77 for the first and second models respectively.

Discussion and conclusion

The declines in religious affiliation and increase in divorce in Britain have been noted by other studies (for review, see Williams and Francis, in press), including some based on the dataset used in this study. What this study has done is to interrogate the association, and attempt to remove confounding effects that result from the different age spectra of different cohorts in the overall sample available for analysis. By confining analysis to particular cohorts and age groups, the effects of religiosity can be assessed with greater confidence. From this analysis several key conclusions arise.

The first conclusion concerns the clear association between levels of divorce and some types of religious status. The lower rate of marital breakdown for active Christian affiliates compared with non-religious non-attendees is not surprising, given both the biblical injunctions and the long-standing traditions of the Christian Church. This does not mean that the levels of breakdown of marriage are stable among this group, and levels increased significantly over the period of the study. Christians who attended church less than once a month showed levels of separation or divorce that were higher than among active Christians but lower than among the non-religiously affiliated or non-attending Christian affiliates. The latter group appeared to be no

different from the non-affiliated group, suggesting that affiliation alone was not a sufficiently strong religious indicator to shape behaviour in this area.

The second conclusion arises in comparing these results with comparable analyses of the rates of cohabitation in this dataset (Village, Williams, & Francis, in press). In the case of cohabitation, all Christian affiliated groups showed significantly lower levels than non-religious affiliates, and active Christians showed consistently low rates of cohabitation across time. This may have arisen because cohabitation is considered a less religiously acceptable or a less socially acceptable practice compared to separation or divorce. The survey grouped separation with divorce, even though separation may be much less stigmatized than divorce in the Christian tradition. St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians makes provision for Christians to separate from unbelieving spouses who are not willing to stay with their partners (1 Corinthians 7:10-11). Christians are not encouraged to initiate separation or accept divorce, but this does not mean that they can prevent it, which may be another reason why Christian affiliates in this sample were closer to non-affiliates in terms of separation or divorce than in terms of cohabitation. The latter is generally a state chosen by both parties, whereas the former may not necessarily be so. In marriages where one partner is Christian and the other partner is not, the Christian partner may have to accept a marital breakdown that runs counter to his or her faith and preference.

The third conclusion is that denominational differences were generally slight, and the main effect was for a higher rate of separation or divorce among Roman Catholics when compared to those affiliated to other denominations. This is perhaps surprising, given the stricter prohibition on divorce in the Roman Catholic Church compared with other denominations. This does not seem to have encouraged greater

fidelity by Catholics, though it is not possible in the present dataset to tell if the higher rate was due to higher levels of separation, divorce or both.

An anomalous finding of this study is the consistently higher proportion of divorcees among women than among men, a difference that was apparent across groups of all religious status. The difference was striking because it implied that, on average, women were almost twice as likely to be separated or divorced than were men. This may be related to the higher proportion of women in the sample, which was evident in all years and all age groups, suggesting that women are generally more willing to take part in the BSA surveys than were men. This would not itself explain the sex difference in divorce rates, but indicates that perhaps men may be less willing than women to admit to being separated or divorced. There may, however, be other reasons for the different levels in the sexes. The survey sampled householders, so a disparity could arise if divorced men are more likely than divorced women to become homeless. Another possibility is that divorced men may be more likely to remarry than divorced women.

Although these biases do not substantially alter the tests of religious effects on separation and divorce, they do indicate that surveys of this nature need to try and address any sex bias and also ask more carefully nuanced questions about marital status. In particular, it would be useful to separate out first marriages from subsequent ones and to distinguish between those who are separated rather than divorced. Marital and relationship histories are becoming increasingly complex in Britain, and surveys need to keep abreast of these changes.

Table 1 Percentage separated or divorced categorised by independent variables

		Separated or divorced	
		%	N
Sex	Male	14.0	7127
	Female	20.4	8587
Age	36-45	15.7	9614
	46-60	20.3	6100
Year	1985-89	9.2	1386
	1990-94	13.8	2451
	1995-99	18.6	3670
	2000-05	19.5	8207
Attendance	Never	18.7	10507
	Casual attendance	16.0	2602
	Frequent attendance	14.1	2605
Religious status	No religion	18.6	6778
	Christian not attending	18.9	3729
	Christian casual attendance	16.0	2602
	Christian frequent attendance	14.1	2605
	Christian denomination		
	Church of England	15.8	4966
	Roman Catholic	18.7	1611
	Other	16.7	1381
	No denomination	17.4	978

Table 2 Multiple logistic regression analysis of separation and divorce

	Category	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	Wald	Odds ratio
Sex	Female	0.52	0.04	136.02	1.68 ***
Age		0.07	0.02	12.00	1.07 **
Age squared		0.00	0.00	7.37	1.00 **
Year		0.04	0.01	58.28	1.04 ***
Religious status					
	Christian non attendance	-0.05	0.05	1.04	0.95
	Christian casual attendance	-0.26	0.06	16.85	0.77 ***
	Christian frequent attendance	-0.43	0.07	43.52	0.65 ***

Note: reference categories for categorical variables were sex: male; religious status: no religion. Significance is for odds ratio \neq unity, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. $N = 15,714$

Table 3 Multiple logistic regression analysis of separation and divorce by denomination

	Category	<i>B</i>	<i>S.E.</i>	Wald	Odds ratio
Sex	Female	0.57	0.06	82.42	1.77 ***
Age		0.05	0.03	3.85	1.06 *
Age squared		-0.00	0.00	2.34	1.00
Year		0.04	0.01	38.02	1.04 ***
Attendance		-0.23	0.04	40.10	0.79 ***
Religious denomination					
	Roman Catholic	0.32	0.08	16.93	1.38 ***
	Other denominations	0.15	0.09	3.32	1.17
	No denomination	0.12	0.10	1.66	1.13

Note: reference categories for categorical variables were sex: male; denomination: Church of England. Significance is for odds ratio \neq unity, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. $N = 8936$.

Figure 1 Percentage of respondents separated or divorced in relation to age

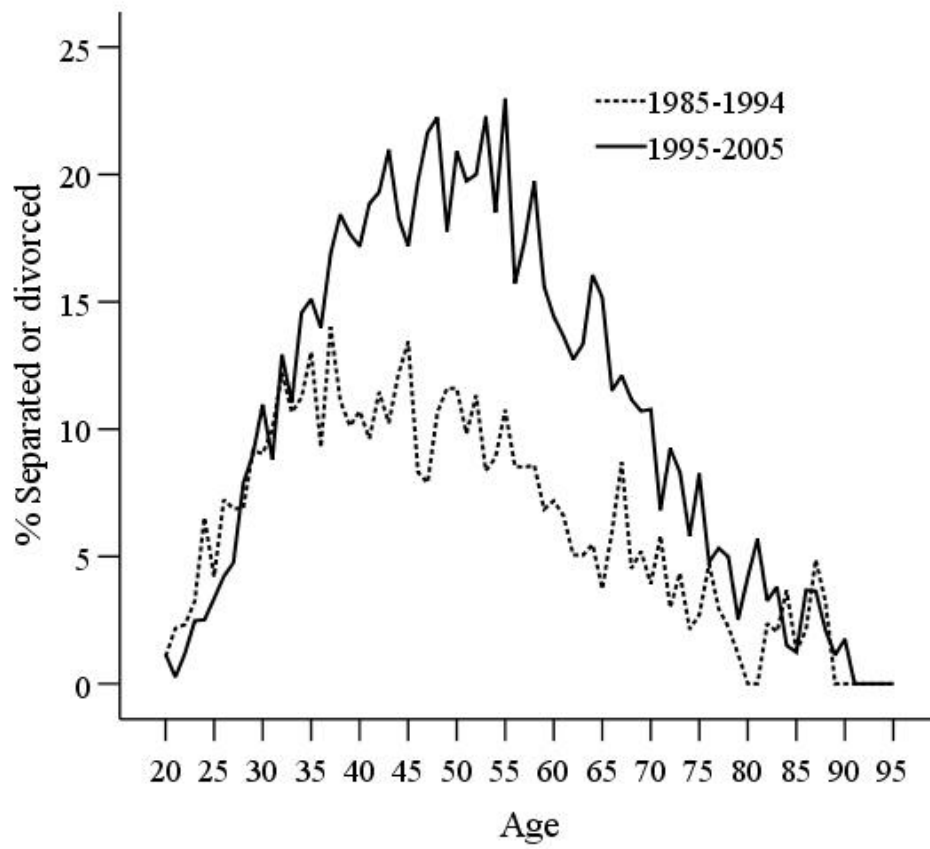
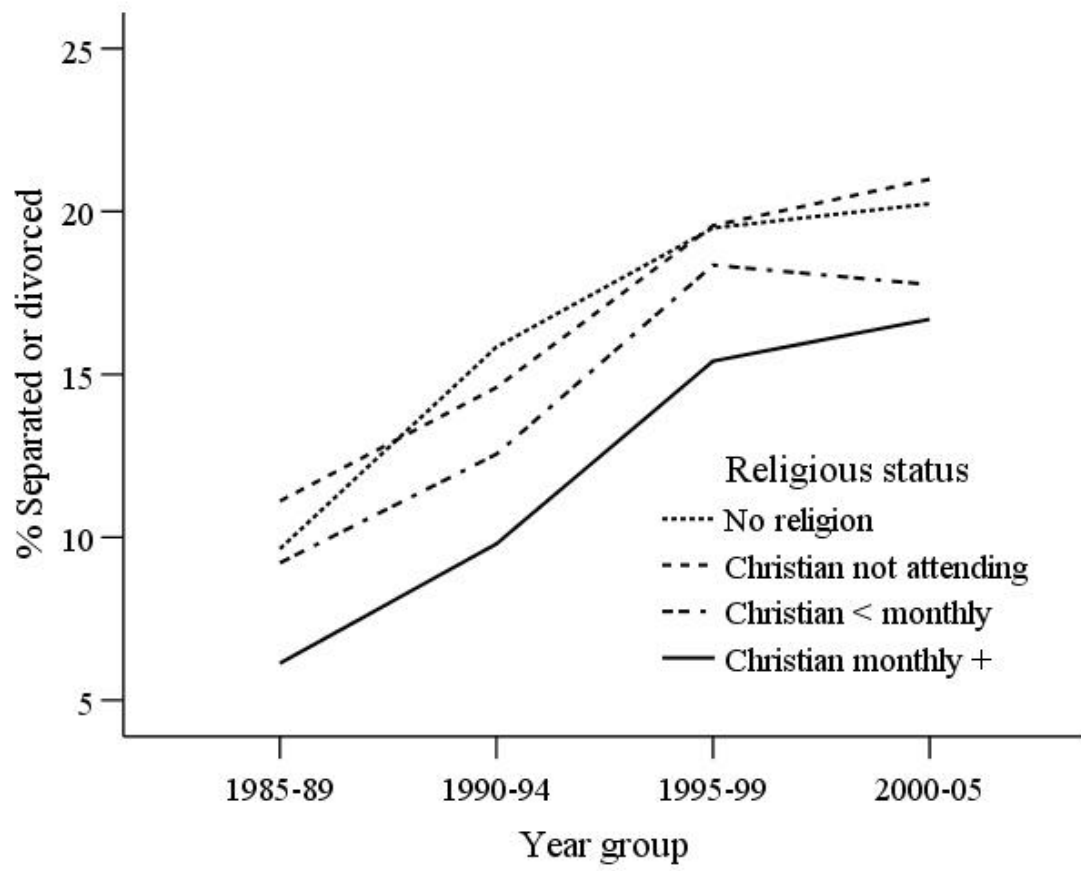


Figure 2. Separation or divorce by year and religious status



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