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# The Timing of First Marriage: Are There Religious Variations?

XIAOHE XU

*Mississippi State University*

CLARK D. HUDSPETH

*Jacksonville State University*

JOHN P. BARTKOWSKI

*Mississippi State University*

Using survey data from a nationally representative sample, this article explores how marriage timing varies across major religious denominations. Survival analysis indicates that net of statistical controls, Catholics, moderate Protestants, conservative Protestants, and Mormons marry significantly earlier than their unaffiliated counterparts. This holds true for women and men. However, no statistical differences emerge between Jews, liberal Protestants, and the unaffiliated. As surmised, auxiliary statistical tests reveal additional religious subcultural variations: (a) Jews tend to marry later than Catholics, conservative Protestants, and Mormons; (b) Catholics also marry later than conservative Protestants and Mormons; (c) no statistical difference surfaces between Mormons and conservative Protestants; and (d) differences between Catholics and liberal Protestants as well as between Jews and liberal Protestants are statistically negligible. These findings systematically support the denominational subcultural paradigm in the case of marriage timing.

**Keywords:** *first marriage; marriage timing; religious variations; religious subcultural variations; denominational subcultural paradigm*

Dramatic changes have occurred in U.S. marriage patterns during the past several decades, thus giving rise to scholarly interest in the timing of first marriage. The proportion ever marrying has declined signifi-

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cantly, and rates of premarital cohabitation have risen dramatically (Casper & Bianchi, 2002; Cherlin, 1992; Wu, 1999). Although some young Americans have avoided marriage altogether, many others have chosen to marry but now do so at a much older age when compared with those in previous generations. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1999), the estimated median age at first marriage for men and women increased significantly. Whereas men in 1960 married at a median age of 22.8, they now marry at a median age of 26.7. In 1960, women entered their first marriage at a median age of 20.3; by 1998, women's median age at first marriage rose to 25. Given the fact that delayed entry into marriage is quite common for women with more advanced levels of schooling and increased labor market attachment, some scholars have suggested that changing gender norms and expanding workplace opportunities for women are a primary cause of this trend (Michael & Tuma, 1985; Oppenheimer, 1988). Thus, a growing body of research has noted the delay of first marriage today when compared with that of previous generations.

For several reasons, it is important that social researchers continue to track this trend. First, scholarly inquiry into the timing of first marriage could shed light on the social consequences of marriage. A growing number of studies suggest that marriage yields benefits for men and women. Married persons report higher levels of physical, psychological, and economic well-being than the unmarried (Nock, 1998; Waite, 1995). Moreover, patterns of gender inequality once attributed to marriage have now been traced to other sources (e.g., labor market discrimination, the costs of child rearing for mothers, and patriarchal ideologies; England, 2000). Consequently, research into marriage timing could highlight how such benefits vary, if at all, for those who delay first marriage when compared with their early-marrying counterparts.

In addition, continued attention to marriage timing could shed additional light on the intersecting influence of structural and individual factors on this important life course transition. Changes in the timing of first marriage might be indicative of broader structural transformations such as new educational and employment opportunities or shifts in local marriage markets (Sassler, 1997). At the same time, changes detected in the timing of first marriage might provide important insight into individual life course transitions and preferences for family living. Consequently, a more in-depth examination of the timing of first marriage can help scholars understand subsequent life course transitions triggered by this rite of passage, including childbearing, parenthood, educational attainment, and labor force participation after marriage and divorce (Axinn & Thornton, 1992).

Prior research has already documented a range of structural and individual determinants of marriage timing. They include, but are not limited to, educational status (Michael & Tuma, 1985; Thornton, Axinn, & Teachman, 1995), career-entry difficulties and employment opportunities (Oppenheimer, Kalmijn, & Lim, 1997; Thornton, Axinn, & Teachman, 1995), premarital birth (Bennett, Blanc, & Bloom, 1988), premarital cohabitation (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991; Waite, 1995; Wu, 1999), childhood family structure (Lehrer, 2000; Li & Wojtkiewicz, 1994), parental resources (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Lehrer, 2000), birth cohorts (Lehrer, 2000; Sassler, 1997), gender and ethnicity (Ferguson, 1995; Sassler, 1997; Teachman, Tedrow, & Crowder, 2000), and affective disorders (Forthofer, Kessler, Story, & Gotlib, 1996).

Given this lengthy list of antecedents, it is striking that scholars have not investigated the religious roots of marriage timing in any sustained fashion. More than other social institution, religious organizations portray themselves as profamily (Christiano, 2000; Gay, Ellison, & Powers, 1996; Hertel & Hughes, 1987). Conservative religious groups valorize the marital relationship and, by extension, the nuclear family as the most basic and fundamental unit of social organization (Bartkowski, 2001; Gallagher, 2003; Manning, 1999; Wilcox & Chaves, n.d.; Wilson & Music, 1996). Yet, despite these facts, a careful review of the literature reveals a pointed call for research on this subject (Althaus, 1992) complemented by very little systematic empirical research. The current study aims to fill this void, with particular attention to the following research questions: Does religion influence marriage timing? Given the level of religious diversity in America, are there denominational variations in the timing of first marriage among those affiliated with conservative, moderate, and liberal Protestant faith traditions? How does the timing of first marriage among adherents associated with these denominations vary when compared with that which characterizes Catholics, Jews, Mormons, and those who are unaffiliated ("religious nones")?

### **DENOMINATIONAL SUBCULTURES AND MARRIAGE TIMING: POTENTIAL LINKAGES**

Much research on marriage timing continues to concentrate on structural conditions and dynamics of marriage market (Oppenheimer, 1988; Oppenheimer et al., 1997). Oppenheimer et al. (1997) demonstrated that women's participation in the paid labor force and men's career transitions

influence the age at which they marry. Furthermore, they showed that the labor market positions of men and women have altered their marriage-market positions and, consequently, their marriage timing. In the current study, we expanded on previous research by developing an alternative explanation. Instead of focusing on the structural conditions of marriage timing, we explored how religious affiliation leads to patterned differences in the timing of first marriage for men and women. To do so, we drew on existing research that has called attention to the subcultural differences toward family life exhibited by U.S. religious denominations. We conceptualized the effect of religious subcultural variations on marriage timing in terms of the relationship between men and women's religious identities and memberships and the transition to marriage. Our goal was to use this cultural approach to complement, but not to replace, the well-developed structural approach.

The linkages between religion, marriage, and family life have long been the subject of social scientific inquiry. It is known, for example, that historical trends in family behavior (e.g., fertility decline, higher rates of premarital sex and pregnancy, higher levels of divorce, and the pervasiveness of nonmarital cohabitation) are associated with changes in the theological edicts and social dominance of religion (Heaton & Goodman, 1985; Thornton, Axinn, & Hill, 1992). Thus far, scholarly research has established crucial and significant relationships between religion and assortative mating (Johnson, 1980; Kalmijn, 1991), fertility (Mosher, Williams, & Johnson, 1992), child rearing (Alwin, 1986; Bartkowski & Xu, 2000; Ellison, Bartkowski, & Segal, 1996), the division of domestic labor (Ellison & Bartkowski, 2002), domestic violence (Ellison, Bartkowski, & Anderson, 1999), marital quality (Booth, Johnson, Branaman, & Sica, 1995; Heaton, 1984; Xu & Toth, 1997), and divorce (Hansen, 1991; Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993). Most Christian denominations continue to uphold marriage and family life as a desirable lifestyle while condemning premarital sex or encouraging their younger members to delay first intercourse (Christiano, 2000; Hadden, 1983; Hargrove, 1983; U.S. Catholic Conference, 1977).

Despite the valorization of family life among religious groups, recent scholarship has highlighted distinctive denominational subcultures concerning profamily issues (Christiano, 2000; Gay et al., 1996; Hertel & Hughes, 1987; see also Grasmick, Wilcox, & Bird, 1990; Hargrove, 1983; Smith, 1998; Wilcox, 1999; Wilson & Musick, 1996). Such scholarship has revealed significant denominational differences pertaining to support for traditional family norms (e.g., husband providership, patriarchal decision making in the home), intolerance of divorce, abortion, homosexual-

ity, and views toward other key indicators of a profamily orientation. Thus, it seems reasonable to suspect that these same denominational subcultures might influence other aspects of family life including marriage timing. Yet previous research on this topic is extremely limited.

Only two previous studies broach the relationship between religion and marriage timing. In a path-breaking investigation, Hammond, Cole, and Beck (1993) explored the influence of religious background on early marriage (i.e., the propensity to marry by age 19). They found that White religious conservatives were considerably more likely to marry by age 19, whereas Catholics and non-Christians were consistently less likely to do so. In the only other study on this topic, Lehrer (2000) examined religious variations in the timing of marriage and cohabitation among women in two birth cohorts—those born before 1960, and those born after this benchmark date. Lehrer (2000) found that Latter-Day Saint (Mormon) and conservative Protestant women marry at earlier ages than their Catholic and mainline Protestant counterparts, with the most pronounced differences being observed among those born prior to 1960.

Despite the important findings yielded by these investigations, they have limitations. First, both studies use an arbitrary definition of *marriage timing*. Hammond and colleagues (1993) restricted their investigation to teen marriage (i.e., those unions formed by age 19), while Lehrer's (2000) study was based on an inadequately justified dependent variable to conceptualize early marriage (age 18 years and younger), intermediate marriage (age 19 to 26 years), and late marriage (age 27 years and older). Because various scholars have used different ages to define early, intermediate, and late marriage (cf. Forthofer et al., 1996; Lehrer, 2000), it is important to move away from such arbitrary categorical conceptualizations of marriage timing and, instead, adopt a more valid continuous measure.

Second, because both studies focused only on respondents who were currently married, they omitted censored observations. Restricting one's sample only to those who are married without accounting for the fact that some unmarried respondents (excluded from the analysis) will marry at some future point introduces a significant source of bias into statistical models. This oversight is unfortunate because there are numerous methodological approaches available that are capable of dealing with censoring (especially right censoring) when studying life course transitions. Survival analysis and/or hazard modeling, for example, are the most appropriate methodologies to utilize in such cases. Both techniques provide the benefit of treating the unmarried status as censoring information and avoid the bias introduced by excluding the unmarried from the study altogether.

Finally, both studies are characterized by sampling and methodological lacunae. Given the low incidence of teen marriage among African American men, this group was dropped from the investigation conducted by Hammond and colleagues (1993). This same study had to utilize a restricted sample approach that eliminated Black girls from key portions of the analysis (Hammond et al., 1993, pp. 120-121). Lehrer's (2000) study, although utilizing some statistically sophisticated techniques, focused solely on White female respondents and excluded the religiously unaffiliated from the analysis. Lehrer's (2000) study also produced findings about Latter-Day Saint distinctiveness with such a small number of cases ( $n = 20$ ) that she cautions against drawing strong generalizations about Mormons in the post-1960 birth cohort of women. Likewise, Jews had to be dropped altogether from Lehrer's (2000) analysis of this birth cohort because there were too few cases ( $n = 12$ ) from which to draw valid findings.

In short, preliminary evidence points to systematic linkages between denominational affiliation and the timing of first marriage. Yet the research to date has been characterized by conceptual, methodological, and empirical limitations. Consequently, there is much yet to learn about this phenomenon. We extended this line of research by considering how cultural schemas and demographic patterns that characterize major religious denominations in the United States might influence marriage timing. After doing so, we generated a series of hypotheses about religion and marriage timing. We then analyzed nationally representative survey data to test these hypotheses. It is important to note at the outset that, as the first study of religion and marriage timing, the current investigation focused on general interdenominational tendencies rather than a more fine-grained focus on intradenominational variations.

#### THE PRIMACY AND CENTRALITY OF MARRIAGE

Judeo-Christian religions support marriage and childbearing by married couples while discouraging premarital and extramarital sexuality (Thornton, Axinn, & Hill, 1992). However, there is good reason to believe that denominations vary in the emphasis they place on being married. Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), for example, place the family at the very center of their faith by emphasizing marital and familial togetherness in this life and even beyond death (Thomas, 1983). Mormons evince an especially strong commitment to marriage. Similar to conservative Protestant luminaries, Mormon leaders strongly encourage their members to get married and, once married, to avoid divorce except for compelling reasons

(Heaton & Goodman, 1985; Wilson & Musick, 1996). The theologies in such churches sacralize the marital bond as the part of God's plan for self-development and child nurturance in this life, as well as the long-term spiritual salvation of believers.

By contrast, Catholicism is marked by a promarriage orientation that is considerably less robust. Historically, the Catholic Church had adopted a strong pronuptialist theology. However, changes in American Catholicism during the 1960s led priests and religious leaders to downplay the importance of marriage. During this same time, Catholic laity became less inclined to accept the Church's traditional teachings on marriage, which they increasingly viewed as an individual choice. In recent years, the Catholic Church has attempted to reinvigorate the laity's commitment to marriage through papal pronouncements and marriage preparation classes, including those such as the Catholic Young Married Program targeted specifically at adherents younger than age 21 years who are engaged to be married (Brabant, Forsyth, & Gramling, 1992; Denison, 1990; Hegy & Martos, 2000; Mullaney & Otey, 1983). However, such efforts may be to no avail. Recent survey evidence shows that American Catholics—particularly those in younger cohorts—increasingly favor layperson autonomy concerning decisions about sexuality, reproduction, and family lifestyle options (D'Antonio, 1985; D'Antonio, Davidson, Hoge, & Meyer, 2001; Featherstone, 2001; Greeley, 1990; McNamara, 1985; Pohlhaus, 1998). Moreover, young Catholics also favor delaying family formation until they have accrued enough human capital to ensure their establishment in the professional realm (Sander, 1995).

Given the primacy and centrality of marriage among religious conservatives, many evangelical denominations actively oppose premarital sex and cohabitation. Some research has shown that adherents' participation in religious activities and commitment to dogma can serve to lessen the relative frequency of occurrence of these practices (Hadden, 1983; Hargrove, 1983). Therefore, it could be hypothesized that the degree to which adherents embrace religious doctrines (and, thus, internalize a promarriage orientation) will influence the age at which they marry. As expected, studies in the United States have shown a significant association between religious affiliation and individuals' sexual values and practices. Thornton, Axinn, and Hill (1992) found strong support for the proposition that religious commitment and participation among young people influences cohabitation patterns and the formation of marital unions. The current study revealed that low levels of religiosity are related to a greater propensity to cohabit and a diminished propensity to marry. In other words, young people who are less religious are much more likely to



cohabit instead of marrying when compared with their more religious counterparts. Moreover, respondents who claim no religious affiliation exhibit a much greater tendency toward a cohabitational union and a lower likelihood to marry when compared with the religiously affiliated. These effects were greater for women than for men.

Liberal and moderate Protestants are readily distinguishable from their evangelical counterparts in their commitment to marriage. The religious teachings of such denominations do not place the same premium on marriage. In the Unitarian Church, for example, marriage is viewed simply as a “union between equal partners” (Coltrane & Collins, 2001, p. 23). Even more moderate Protestant denominations, such as the United Methodist Church, are deeply factionalized over the question of same-sex marriage.

Given denominational variations in the primacy and centrality of marriage, it seems reasonable to anticipate religious and subcultural differences in the timing of marriage. We expected especially dramatic differences in the timing of first marriage between those who are religiously affiliated and their unaffiliated counterparts. We also expected patterns of early marriage to be most pronounced among adherents to denominations whose theological orientations would seem to encourage early family formation (viz., Mormons and evangelicals). These denominational subcultures, as we have discussed above, are especially promarriage.

The second column of Table 1 summarizes the relative levels of commitment to marriage demonstrated by major religious denominations in America. This table was generated from an extensive review of scholarly studies on this topic. (The studies consulted are cited in the footnote to the table.) As is evident from the table, the strongest pronuptial orientations are manifested by Orthodox Jews, conservative Protestants, and Latter-Day Saints. (We do not review the scholarship on various Jewish denominations in prose because the data used in the current study do not permit us to draw distinctions between Orthodox and Reformed Jews.) In the remainder of this literature review, we continue to evaluate the teachings of these religious traditions concerning factors that might influence the timing of first marriage—namely, fertility patterns, gender role orientations, and educational attainment. Denominational teachings on these topics are also summarized in Table 1, though they are reviewed in more detail below.

#### **FERTILITY PATTERNS**

In congruence with promarriage and profamily subcultures, Lehrer’s (2000) research on the influence of religion on union formation reveals

**TABLE 1**  
**Religious Traditions' Orientations Toward Marriage, Fertility,  
 Gender Roles, and Educational Attainment**

	<i>Marriage</i>	<i>Fertility</i>	<i>Gender Roles</i>	<i>Secular Education</i>
	<i>Encouragement to Marry (Pronuptiality)</i>	<i>Encouragement to Bear Children (Pronatalism)</i>	<i>Gender Role Distinctiveness</i>	<i>Encouragement to Obtain College Degree</i>
Jewish				
Orthodox	High	Moderate	High	High
Reformed	Low	Low	Low	High
Protestant				
Mainline (liberal and moderate)	Moderate	Moderate	Low	High
Conservative Protestant	High	High	High	Low
Catholic				
(subgroup variations) <sup>a</sup>	Moderate	High	Moderate	Moderate
Latter-Day Saint	High	High	High	High

SOURCE: Table compiled from the following sources: Albrecht and Heaton (1984); Bahr (1982); Cherlin and Celebuski (1983); Christiano (2000); Coltrane and Collins (2001, p. 23); Darnell and Sherkat (1997); Heaton (1986, 2002); Marcum (1981, 1988); Rourke (1998); Sander (1995); Sherkat and Darnell (1999); Wilcox (2002a, 2002b).

NOTE: a. Ethnic diversity within American Catholicism contributes to distinctive orientations toward family life within this denomination (Christiano, 2000). For example, marriage orientations vary for different types of Hispanic Catholics (Puerto Rican vs. Mexican American). And Hispanic Catholics tend to have more traditional gender-role orientations than White Catholics.

that women who have a desire for large families understandably have a motive to get married at a younger age than those who wish to have only one or two children. This and other research indicates that the desired family size appears to have religious underpinnings (Christiano, 2000). For instance, Catholic beliefs and teachings are strongly pronatalist. Differential comparisons by religion in the United States suggest that, historically, one of the most outstanding features of this group has been their large family size (Heaton & Goodman, 1985). In the past, the Catholic Church's teachings on Christian marriage had emphasized that, along with conjugal love, the primary purpose of marriage is procreation and child rearing (D'Antonio & Cavanaugh, 1983). It was further stressed that the woman's

place was in the home, that marriage was a sacrament, and that any expression of sexuality outside of marriage was deemed a grave sin. Althaus's (1992) study shows that though Catholic women had fewer births at the time of the survey than their Protestant counterparts, the total number of births for Catholic and Protestant women was much greater than those reported by the unaffiliated. Moreover, Catholic women had a much higher number of expected births than Protestant and unaffiliated women. Still, it must be noted that over time the level of influence the Catholic Church has on its members has been steadily declining (Alwin, 1986; D'Antonio et al., 2001).

By contrast, the fertility of another formidably pronatalist group, Mormons, remains at persistently and uncommonly high levels (Heaton, 1986; Lehrer, 2000; Thomas, 1983; Thornton, 1979). Even though it is increasingly difficult for Mormons to draw support for their high fertility ethic, active and committed Mormons are able to retain a higher fertility level by marrying significantly younger than other groups (Thomas, 1983). Conversely, those of the Jewish faith have consistently exhibited an unusually low level of fertility (Della Pergolla, 1980; Goldscheider, 1967), which suggests implicitly that the adherents to Judaism are likely to marry late irrespective of gender. Situated between these extremes, some teachings articulated by conservative Protestant groups are also pronatalist (Marcum, 1981); nevertheless, their fertility levels register only marginally above that of mainline Protestants (Lehrer, 1996, 2000).

Empirical data on religious variations in childbearing reveal a rank ordering of fertility patterns, such that the Latter-Day Saint (Mormon) average of 3.3 children per family substantially outpaces Catholics (2.4), conservative Protestants (2.3), and liberal Protestants (2.0). These differences are understandable when contrasting the strongly pronatalist tenets of Mormon theology in which family relationships are viewed as eternal with the Episcopalian view of marriage as a relationship "that may or may not hold within it the procreation of children as a goal" (Coltrane & Collins, 2001, p. 23). The third column from the left in Table 1 summarizes these various positions.

Given religious variations in reproductive beliefs and behaviors, there is reason to suspect that there will be religious variations in the timing of first marriage. We contend that a high fertility level preferred by certain pronatalist groups can only be sustained by marrying early, whereas a less robust commitment to high rates of fertility and fecundity will likely coincide with a postponement of marriage.

### GENDER ROLE ORIENTATIONS

On another front, a wealth of empirical evidence suggests that members of conservative Protestant denominations, and individuals who endorse inerrant views of the Bible, prefer and stress traditional gender roles (Bartkowski, 2001; Ellison, Bartkowski, & Anderson, 1999; Gay et al., 1996; Grasmick et al., 1990; Hertel & Hughes, 1987; Peek, Lowe, & Williams, 1991; Sherkat, 2000; Smith, 1998). Generally speaking, denominations that encourage high fertility also emphasize women's roles as mothers and homemakers (Lehrer, 2000). Thus, as Oppenheimer (1988) suggested, the optimal timing of entry into marriage varies because young women's considerations as to where to orient their future energy and efforts also vary with respect to paid work and labor-market placement versus childbearing and domestic pursuits (see also Sherkat, 2000). Research indicates that fundamentalist Protestant and Mormon women are more likely than their mainline Protestant counterparts to orient their efforts toward domestic activities (Heaton & Cornwall, 1989). In the case of Catholics, several studies documented a trend toward convergence to mainline Protestant practices in the areas of women's time allocation and labor supply (e.g., Lehrer, 1995). In other words, more conservative denominations promote traditional notions of femininity and masculinity by discouraging women's labor force participation, encouraging their involvement in and commitment to family life through the institution of marriage, and advocating deference to male authority within the home. At the other end of the spectrum, Jewish women's commitment to the labor market is stronger than that of their non-Jewish counterparts (Hartman & Hartman, 1996).<sup>1</sup> Although the labor force participation of Jewish women often declines in homes with young children (Chiswick, 1986), their withdrawal from the workforce is usually temporary. The gender role orientations of various denominations are depicted in Table 1.

### EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Another mechanism through which religious subcultures can exert a great impact on marriage timing is educational attainment. Previous demographic research has demonstrated that increased educational attainment typically serves to delay the entry into first marriage. Thus, if there are denominational variations in educational attainment, it will come as no surprise that there will be denominational variations in marriage tim-

ing. Indeed, research has uncovered significant differences in educational attainment by religion. For instance, using non-Hispanic White respondents who resided in the United States at age 16 and who were born in the period 1945 to 1960, Lehrer (1999) reported that educational attainment is highest among Jews and lowest among fundamentalist Protestants, with Catholics and mainline Protestants situated between them. This finding is generally consistent with other research that shows an inhibitory effect of fundamentalism on educational attainment net of other factors (Darnell & Sherkat, 1997).

The above-discussed denominational variations in educational attainment have been attributed to religious subcultural orientations (see Table 1). For conservative Protestants, for example, tensions between religious and secular education, and between religious faith and scientific methods, have always been high. Avoiding the secularizing effects of higher education may be one way that conservative Protestants preserve their subcultural distinctiveness (see Smith, 1998). Consequently, secular education has oftentimes been deemed valueless unless it is religious in content (Darnell & Sherkat, 1997). On the other hand, secular education and worldly pursuits are valued, if not encouraged, by Jews and liberal Protestants, such that differential investment in and return from education are high (Lehrer, 1999). With these ascertained linkages between denominational subcultures and educational attainment, we surmised that denominational variations in educational attainment will be translated differentially into variations in marriage timing.

An important exception to this overall pattern is that of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons). Research reveals a strong association between Mormon religiosity and educational attainment. Utah, the geographic and cultural center of Mormonism in the United States, is among the nation's leaders in residents having a high school diploma or some college experience (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Moreover, Latter-Day Saints who attend church services regularly are more highly educated than their less religious peers (Albrecht & Heaton, 1984). Given the strongly pronuptial, pronatal, and proeducation orientations of the Latter-Day Saint Church, it is possible that Mormons pursue a "both/and" strategy in which early family formation is sought in tandem with educational credentialing. Whereas others may put off marriage to pursue a college degree, or marry early and thereby forestall educational credentialing, Latter-Day Saints may not see these options as necessarily mutually exclusive or competitive.

### **HYPOTHESES**

The evidence and scholarship surveyed above lends itself to the generation of two hypotheses. First, we hypothesize that Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), conservative Protestants, and (to a lesser degree) moderate Protestants will be more likely to marry and will do so at much younger ages when compared with adherents of other denominations and religious nones (the unaffiliated). As part of this broader hypothesis, we suspected that Catholics will be located between early-marrying Mormons and evangelicals on the one hand and late-marrying religious nones and Jews on the other.

Second, based on the reviewed literature, we also hypothesized that Jews and liberal Protestants will be as likely as those who are unaffiliated to marry late. In addition, given a similar array of cultural orientations and emphases in relation to gender roles and educational attainment, we conjectured that there will be little or no difference between Jews and liberal Protestants in marriage timing.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **DATA SOURCE AND MEASURES**

The data for the current study are drawn from the first wave of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH-1), a cross-sectional national probability sample of 13,017 adults age 18 years and older residing in the contiguous United States (Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988).<sup>2</sup> The NSFH-1 oversampled such underrepresented groups as African Americans, Puerto Rican and Mexican Americans, single-parent families, families with stepchildren, recently married persons, and cohabiting couples. Interviews were undertaken in 1987 and 1988.

Because of case mortality due to missing data in the variables included in the current study and the exclusion of the cases with miscellaneous religious affiliations and, in particular, those who had switched their religious affiliations since childhood, the sample size dropped to 10,045, consisting of 5,904 women and 4,141 men. Of 10,045 respondents, about 21% of women and 27% of men were reportedly never married at the time of interview (see Table 2). Because there are known gender differentials in the timing of first marriage (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999), the statistical analysis is conducted for the male and female subsamples separately.

**TABLE 2**  
**Sample Characteristics by Gender**

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Women</i>		<i>Men</i>	
	<i>n</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Waiting time <sup>a</sup>	5,904	23.41 ( <i>M</i> ) 8.39 ( <i>SD</i> )	4,141	25.49 ( <i>M</i> ) 7.72 ( <i>SD</i> )
Event				
Ever married	4,678	79.20	3,027	73.10
Never married	1,226	20.80	1,114	26.90
Religious affiliation				
Not affiliated	286	4.84	378	9.13
Catholic	1,730	29.30	1,185	28.62
Jewish	124	2.10	106	2.56
Mormon	126	2.13	75	1.81
Liberal Protestant	347	5.88	265	6.40
Moderate Protestant	1,271	21.53	871	21.03
Conservative Protestant	2,020	34.21	1,261	30.45
Race				
White	4,155	69.70	3,027	73.10
Black	1,217	20.60	727	17.60
Hispanic	511	8.70	342	8.30
Other	61	1.00	45	1.10
Premarital cohabitation				
Yes	972	16.50	778	18.80
No	4,932	83.50	3,363	81.20
Educational attainment at first marriage				
Less than high school	1,838	31.13	1,095	26.40
High school	1,856	31.44	1,176	28.40
More than high school	2,210	37.43	1,870	45.20
Employment status at first marriage				
Yes	4,692	79.50	3,475	83.90
No	1,212	20.50	666	16.10
Biological two-parent family at age 16				
Yes	3,844	65.10	2,838	68.50
No	2,060	34.90	1,303	31.50
Family on public assistance at age 16				
Yes	704	11.90	408	9.90
No	5,200	88.10	3,733	90.10
Birth cohort				
Pre-World War II	1,764	29.90	1,121	27.10

(continued)

TABLE 2 (continued)

Variables	Women		Men	
	n	Percentage	n	Percentage
World War II	722	12.20	544	13.10
Early baby boom	1,426	24.20	974	23.50
Late baby boom	1,992	33.70	1,502	36.30
Residence at age 16				
West	785	13.30	615	14.90
Midwest	1,483	25.12	1,063	25.70
South	2,118	35.87	1,405	33.90
Northeast	1,144	19.38	768	18.50
Foreign countries and others	374	6.33	290	7.00
Total N	5,904		4,141	

*Dependent variable: Survival time to first marriage.*<sup>3</sup> In the current study, the dependent variable is the waiting (or survival) time to first marriage measured by the respondent's age at first marriage in person years. For those who are never married, their waiting time is their age in 1987 or 1988 when the interview was conducted. From an event history perspective, the occurrence of first marriage is defined as a single event and the nonoccurrence of first marriage is defined as censoring (e.g., those who were not married yet at the time of interview but might marry in the future). As shown in Table 2, the mean waiting time (age) is 23.4 for women and 25.5 for men.

*Key independent variable: Denominational affiliation.* A historical problem faced by scholars of religion has been the construction of a denominational classification scheme (Smith, 1990). Thus far, one of the most useful indexes devised has been to place the various Christian denominations along a continuum ranging from conservative to liberal, with moderate denominations in between these two extremes. However, Jewish, Catholic, and Mormon denominations are distinct from Protestants in religious tradition and historical experience, thereby making it difficult to place them singularly into a conservative-moderate-liberal classification scheme (Bartkowski & Xu, 2000). In response to these difficulties, Smith (1990) summarized and synthesized the main points of difference and prior classification systems into what has become the most widely used categorization scheme. Conceptually, Judeo-Christian denominations can be delineated as Jewish, Catholic, Mormon, and con-



servative, moderate, or liberal Protestant faiths by following the lead of Smith (1990), Ellison, Bartkowski, and Anderson (1999), and Bartkowski and Xu (2000). Thus the denomination in which respondents were reared was recoded into seven groups (see Table 2). They are Conservative Protestant (such as Southern Baptist, independent Baptist, Church of Christ, Church of God, Assemblies of God, Pentecostal/Holiness, Jehovah's Witness, and other fundamentalist, evangelical, and charismatic churches, constituting 34.21% of female respondents and 30.45% of male respondents); Moderate Protestant (consisting largely of Methodist, Lutheran [ELCA], and Disciples of Christ, making up 21.53% and 21.03% of female and male respondents, respectively); Liberal Protestant (consisting principally of Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Unitarian, representing 5.88% of female respondents and 6.4% of male respondents); Catholic (29.3% female and 28.62% male); Jewish (2.1% female and 2.56% male, with this category unfortunately including Orthodox Jews and their more liberal counterparts, Reformed Jews, because these groups were collapsed in the NSFH data set); Mormon (2.13% female and 1.81% male); and Unaffiliated (4.84% female and 9.13% male). The affiliation variable was further dummy coded, using unaffiliated as the reference category in the multivariate survival analysis.

*Control variables.* To minimize the potential confounding effects of relevant variables, the current study introduced several control variables known to affect the timing of first marriage. These included respondents' years of education (actual years) and employment status (dummy coded with 1 for employed and 0 for otherwise) at the time of first marriage. In addition, family structure (dummy coded as 1 for single-mother household and 0 for otherwise), parental economic resources (i.e., household public assistance use during respondent's adolescence), and place of residence (South used as the reference category; West, Midwest, Northeast, and foreign countries were dummy coded respectively) at age 16 were statistically controlled. Furthermore, premarital cohabitation (dummy coded as 1 for yes and 0 for otherwise), ethnicity (dummy coded as Black, Hispanic, and others with White as the reference category), and birth cohorts (pre-World War II cohort as reference, World War II, early baby boomer, and late baby boomer were dummy coded) were also included.<sup>4</sup>

## STATISTICAL METHODS

To estimate the effects of religious affiliation on the timing and occurrence of first marriage among the respondents included in the NSFH-1

sample, we used several parametric survival models that are appropriate for analyzing continuous-time data. These models have a widespread application and superb advantage in life course analyses in that they can effectively deal with censoring information while investigating time-related life course transitions.

Generally speaking, there are two families of survival models, namely the accelerated failure-time (AFT) model and the multiplicative proportional hazard rate (PH) model (Allison, 1995). In the case of the AFT model, the log-transformed survival time (or waiting time) is regressed linearly on the covariates. The model is denoted as

$$\ln t_j = x_j \beta + z_j,$$

where  $x_j$  is a matrix of covariates,  $\beta$  is a vector of regression coefficients to be estimated, and  $z$  is the error with density  $f()$ . In this generalized expression, the type of the distribution of the error term determines the regression model such that if  $f()$  has a normal density, the log-normal regression model is obtained. Likewise, if  $f()$  has a logistic density, then the log-logistic regression is obtained. Furthermore, if  $f()$  is specified as the extreme-value density, then the exponential or Weibull regression model is derived (Stata, 2001). In addition to the above popular survival regression models, we also estimated a Gompertz model which, along with other models, allowed us the opportunity to select a best fitting model to report our statistical findings.

However, because not all of these models are nested within one another, the goodness-of-fit comparisons of the models cannot be made with the traditional log-likelihood ratio statistics (Allison, 1995). Instead we used the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC) introduced by Akaike (1974) to select the best fitting model. Following Akaike's specification, the AIC in this analysis is calculated as

$$AIC = -2 (\log \text{likelihood}) + 2 (c + p + 1),$$

where  $c$  is the number of parameters and  $p$  is the number of model-specific ancillary parameters. The AIC is reminiscent of and analogous to the adjusted  $R^2$  in least-squares regression in that it penalizes the log-likelihood statistics by taking the number of parameters being estimated in a particular model into consideration. Therefore, the model that minimizes AIC is deemed best among those that are compared (Stata, 2001).

**TABLE 3**  
**Comparison of Models for**  
**Predicting Waiting Time to First Marriage**

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Models</i>	<i>Model Log Likelihood</i>	<i>Ancillary Parameters</i>	<i>Akaike Information Criterion</i>
Women	Exponential	-6,111.65	0	12,269.30
	Weibull	-3,533.97	1	7,115.93
	Gompertz	-5,032.19	1	10,112.39
	Log-normal	-1,933.21	1	3,914.41
	Log-logistic	-1,459.05	1	2,966.10
Men	Exponential	-4,104.01	0	8,254.02
	Weibull	-2,140.78	1	4,329.55
	Gompertz	-3,075.86	1	6,199.72
	Log-normal	-1,213.49	1	2,474.98
	Log-logistic	-1,019.49	1	2,086.99

**ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

Table 3 reports model comparisons by gender. As shown in the table, we estimated five different types of survival models by including religious affiliation as our focal variable and other covariates as statistical controls (e.g., race, premarital cohabitation experiences, educational attainment at first marriage, employment status at first marriage, family structure and economic status at age sixteen, birth cohort, and area of residence at age 16).<sup>5</sup> A careful examination of the AIC statistics reported in the last column of the table indicates that the log-logistic models have the smallest AIC statistics respectively for women and men (AIC = 2,966.1, AIC = 2,086.99, respectively), suggesting that the log-logistic regression model is the best fitting model for both genders.

Table 4 presents the maximum likelihood estimates yielded from the log-logistic regression models separately for women and men. Before rendering our substantive interpretations of the models, we stress two important methodological issues. First, the log-logistic model is the only parametric survival model with a proportional odds and an accelerated failure-time representation (Allison, 1995). Therefore, the parameter estimates derived from the log-logistic models (or log-linear models) can be readily converted to the proportional-odds model estimates in terms of the

**TABLE 4**  
**Maximum Likelihood Parameter Estimates from Log-Logistic**  
**Survival (AFT) Regressions of Age at First Marriage**  
**on Religious Affiliation and Selected Covariates by Gender**

	<i>Women</i>		<i>Men</i>	
	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE
Religious affiliation				
Not affiliated (reference)				
Catholic	-.056**	.018	-.041*	.018
Jewish	-.031	.028	.009	.029
Mormon	-.106***	.028	-.148***	.032
Liberal Protestant	-.030	.022	-.039	.022
Moderate Protestant	-.067***	.018	-.057***	.018
Conservative Protestant	-.096***	.018	-.094***	.017
Race				
White (reference)				
Black	.148***	.010	.101***	.012
Hispanic	.034*	.014	.018	.018
Other	.079*	.037	.064	.043
Premarital cohabitation				
Yes	.113***	.010	.075***	.011
No (reference)				
Educational attainment at first marriage				
Less than high school (reference)				
High school	.136***	.009	.067***	.012
More than high school	.217***	.009	.098***	.011
Employment status at first marriage				
Yes	-.031***	.008	-.031**	.011
No (reference)				
Biological two-parent family at age 16				
Yes	.005	.007	.008	.009
No (reference)				
Family on public assistance at age 16				
Yes	.018	.011	-.004	.014
No (reference)				
Birth cohort				
Pre-World War II (reference)				
World War II	-.050***	.011	-.051***	.013
Early baby boom	-.043***	.009	-.052***	.012
Late baby boom	-.006	.009	-.003	.011
Residence at age 16				
South (reference)				
West	.006	.011	.036*	.014
Midwest	.023*	.009	.009	.011
North East	.067***	.010	.037**	.013
Foreign countries and others	.091***	.017	.085***	.019

(continued)

**TABLE 4 (continued)**

	<i>Women</i>		<i>Men</i>	
	$\beta$	SE	$\beta$	SE
Constant	3.015***	.021	3.212***	.021
Gamma	.144***	.002	.144***	.002
Model $\chi^2$ ( <i>df</i> = 22)	1248.07***		344.54***	
<i>N</i> (person years)	5,904		4,141	

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

log odds or relative odds of survival. This conversion is desirable because it makes interpretations easier and more intuitive. Second, because our study focused on religious variations in marriage timing, we only convert the log-logistic regression estimates that are pertaining to religious affiliation variables. We use  $-\beta/\text{gamma}$  to obtain the proportional-odds model coefficients (log odds) and  $\exp\{-(-\beta/\text{gamma})\}$  to obtain the odds coefficients, where  $\beta$  is the regression estimate and gamma is the scale estimate under the log-logistic model. With these two methodological points in mind, we now proceed to interpret the regression results.

The regression coefficients reported in the table indicate that the expected survival time for women is shorter for those who are affiliated with religious denominations than for the unaffiliated. Although this finding is largely consistent with what we surmised, the regression coefficients are statistically significant only for Catholic, Mormon, moderate, and conservative Protestant women. When we convert the significant accelerated failure-time coefficients to odds coefficients, it becomes apparent that women who are affiliated with Catholic, Mormon, moderate Protestant, and conservative Protestant churches have .678, .479, .628, and .513 times lesser odds of surviving, respectively, than those who are not affiliated with any organized religion ( $\exp\{-(-[-.056]/.144)\}$ ,  $\exp\{-(-[-.106]/.144)\}$ ,  $\exp\{-(-[-.067]/.144)\}$ , and  $\exp\{-(-[-.096]/.144)\}$ ). Substantively, this means that all else being equal, Catholic and Mormon women, along with those of moderate and conservative Protestant faiths, are significantly less likely to delay their marriages as compared to women who are not affiliated. Moreover, the regression coefficients show that there are no statistical differences between Jewish, liberal Protestant women and those who are not affiliated in marriage timing.

Another set of individual chi-square tests that impose an equal constraint on each pair of the denominational dummy variables provides additional insight into denominational variations in marriage timing (results,

not shown, are available from authors). The results of these auxiliary statistical tests reveal the following findings net of statistical controls: (a) Jewish women marry significantly later than Catholic, Mormon, and conservative Protestant women; (b) Catholic women also marry significantly later than Mormon and conservative Protestant women but earlier than the unaffiliated, thus situating Catholic women between early-marrying religious conservatives and late-marrying religious nones and Jews; (c) although liberal and moderate Protestant women marry later than Mormon and conservative Protestant women, no significant difference surfaced between Mormon women and conservative Protestant women; and finally (d) there are no statistical differences between Catholic and liberal Protestant women nor between Jewish and liberal Protestant women in marriage timing. Taken together, these results lend strong credence to both hypotheses developed at the outset with reference to women.

Turning to the regression model for men, we obtained nearly identical findings. If we convert the log-logistic regression coefficients to the odds coefficients, we can conclude that net of statistical controls Catholic, Mormon, moderate and conservative Protestant men have .752, .358, .673, and .521 times lesser odds of surviving, respectively, than the unaffiliated ( $\exp\{-(-[-.041]/.144)\}$ ,  $\exp\{-(-[-.148]/.144)\}$ ,  $\exp\{-(-[-.057]/.144)\}$ , and  $\exp\{-(-[-.094]/.144)\}$ ). In other words, after controlling for relevant covariates, Catholic, Mormon, moderate, and conservative Protestant men are far less likely to delay marriage than their unaffiliated counterparts. However, for Jewish men the regression coefficient is positive but statistically insignificant, indicating that they are only slightly more likely to delay marriage than the unaffiliated. In addition, similar to their female counterparts, liberal Protestant men are as likely as those who are unaffiliated to delay marriage. In other words, there are no statistical differences between Jewish and liberal Protestant men and their unaffiliated peers in marriage time.

In terms of individual chi-square tests, the results for men resemble almost perfectly those for women. Similar to findings that surfaced for women, men's marriage timing is ranked neatly and hierarchically along the conservative and liberal continuum. The results indicate considerable differences in marriage timing among Jewish, liberal Protestant, and Catholic men in comparison with Mormon and conservative Protestant men, respectively. However, there are no significant differences in marriage timing between Jewish and liberal Protestant men or between Catholic and liberal Protestant men. Once again, these findings are consistent with the research hypotheses guiding this investigation.

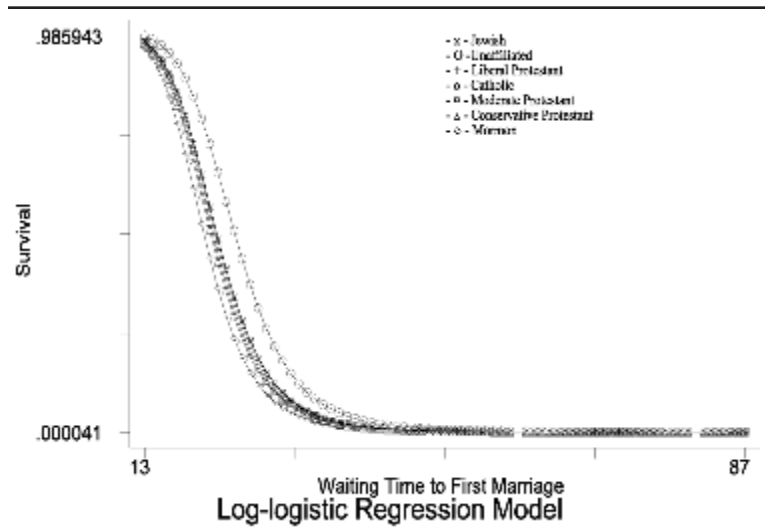


Figure 1: Survival Functions for Women

Taking a cue from Teachman and Hayward’s (1993) suggestions, we now present survival functions, adjusted for censoring and statistical controls, in Figures 1 and 2 for women and men, respectively. Because the survival function represents the cumulative probability that an individual survives to time  $t$  without experiencing first marriage, the graphic presentations of these functions can enhance our understanding and interpretation of religious variations in the timing and pace of first marriage. Indeed, as shown in Figure 1, if 50% of women (the middle point on the y-axis) entered their first marriage, those who are affiliated with any organized religion would have done so at a much younger age than their unaffiliated counterparts (see the horizontal distances between the unaffiliated and others). This is particularly pronounced for Mormon women. Likewise, similar trends can be observed for men as well (see Figure 2). If we draw a horizontal line cutting across the middle point of the y-axis so the survival function  $S_{ij}(t) = .5$ , age differences become readily apparent. Mormon and conservative Protestant men, as it turned out, marry at a much younger age than their respective unaffiliated male counterparts. In short, individuals who are affiliated with conservative denominations, especially with Mormon Church, tend to marry younger than the unaffiliated, and there are minor differences between Jews, liberal Protestants, and the unaffiliated.

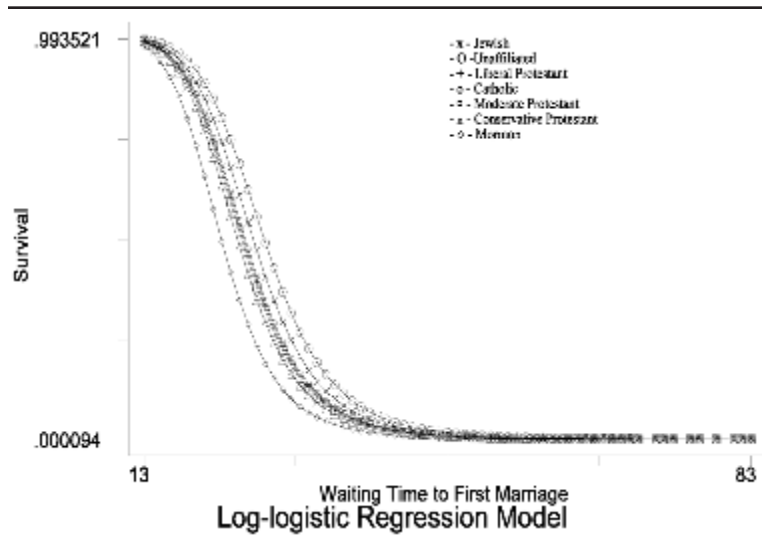


Figure 2: Survival Functions for Men

To provide a better visual presentation of religious variations in the timing of first marriage, we employed a method suggested by Allison (1995) to chart the predicted median survival time, adjusted for censoring and statistical controls, by religious affiliation and gender in Figure 3. Once again, as observed previously, there are systematic and consistent denominational variations in marriage timing. Despite the pervasive age gaps between men and women as shown in the figure, denominational variations in marriage timing differ little by gender (the two lines are roughly parallel). More important, the figure highlights a religious continuum in marriage timing—one in which late-marrying Jews and the unaffiliated occupy one end of this continuum while early-marrying conservative Protestants and Mormons are situated at the other end. This continuum appears to coincide with subcultural variations among denominations in which religious conservatives are readily distinguishable from their more liberal counterparts.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The current study began by highlighting the paucity of research on religious differences in the timing of first marriage. To redress this lacuna, we



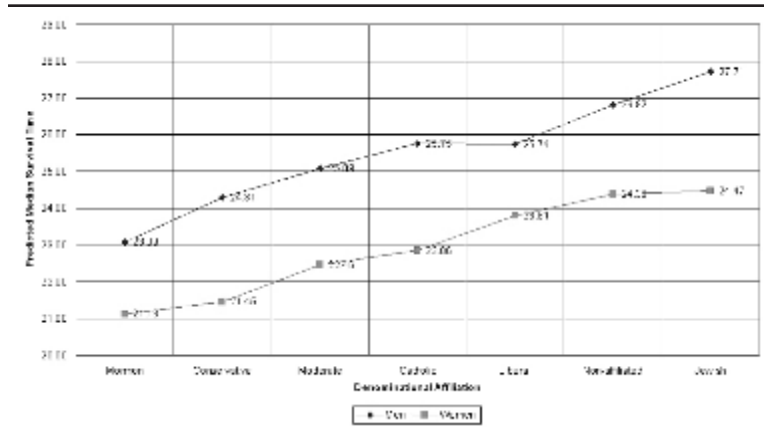


Figure 3: Predicted Median Survival Time by Denominational Affiliation and Gender

reviewed relevant literatures on religious differences in promarriage orientations (pronuptialism), fertility patterns (pronatalism), gender roles, and educational attainment. We then generated testable hypotheses concerning the relationship between religion and the timing of first marriage, with special attention to denominational identities and subcultures. Our results make two unique contributions to the literature concerning marriage timing. First, we showed a significant religious heterogeneity in the increased incidence of delayed marriage in the United States. This finding can help family scholars frame their future research topics in studying subsequent life course transitions such as childbearing and labor force participation for various religious subgroups. Second, by testing a religious subculture paradigm, we provided a culture-centered alternative theory on marriage timing. We suggest that, in addition to a well-developed structural theory of marriage timing, religious subcultural orientations should be considered as they define and shape individuals' decisions and choices. For this reason, we invite family scholars to continue investigating life course transitions across subcultural groups, especially those rooted in religious subcultures.

The results of the current study largely substantiate our expectations about religious variations in the timing of first marriage. After controlling for a large number of sociodemographic variables related to marriage timing, men and women who are affiliated with Mormon, moderate and conservative Protestant denominations show a greater propensity to marry and marry at much younger ages than those who are not affiliated with a

faith tradition. In the case of Mormons, men and women marry even earlier than conservative Protestants. This finding is largely congruent with previous studies highlighting the pronuptialist (marriage-focused) and pronatalist (child-centered) aspects of Mormon theology in this life and beyond the grave. Because it is generally acknowledged that Mormon, moderate and conservative Protestant churches place a great deal of emphasis on marriage, this finding is not surprising. However, it is remarkably consistent with scholarship on the unabashedly profamily character of the distinctive subcultures within these denominations.

In conjunction with the survival curves, our regression analysis shows smaller but significant differences between Catholics and the unaffiliated (religious nones) in the timing of first marriage. These findings are expected. However, ancillary statistical tests (results not shown) also indicate that there are no differences between Catholics and liberal Protestants in marriage timing. Taken together, these findings confirm our suspicion that Catholics would be situated squarely between early-marrying Mormons and evangelicals on the one hand and late-marrying religious nones and Jews on the other. How then can we explain this convergence in the timing of first marriage between Catholics and liberal Protestants? Several possibilities emerge. For Catholics, at least in theory, marriage is deemed a sacrament, and divorce—institutionally sanctioned as serious sin—is generally not an acceptable option for ending an unsatisfactory marriage. If this is the prevalent norm among Catholics, it is plausible that Catholic men and women will invest more time in the mate selection process to ensure a lasting marital relationship. Yet a more plausible explanation concerns structural and economic factors that impinge on Catholic family formation (Sander, 1995). It is indeed possible that the career mindedness of Catholics, especially those attempting to secure a position in the professional class, may be a major contributor to the equal likelihood of delaying marriage among Catholics and liberal Protestants. Regardless of the explanation, our parity in marriage timing between Catholics and liberal Protestants deserves further investigation.

With regard to those of the Jewish faith, marriage is generally seen as the joining of two individuals with the goal of living a constructive, harmonious life, as well as creating a good environment for rearing children. In Reform Judaism, the marital relationship is even considered to be a joint effort in which both partners are equal and there are no particular roles assigned to either (Rourke, 1998). As such, this cultural ideal may encourage women and men to postpone marriage while pursuing education. In addition, career goals are considered necessary to fulfill the religious as well as secular obligations. Indeed, ancillary statistical tests

(results not shown) indicate that Jews are significantly more likely to postpone their first marriage than Catholics, Mormons, moderate Protestants, and conservative Protestants. Therefore, it is reasonable to find that Jews are as unlikely to marry early as are religious nones and liberal Protestants. Among Jews who do ultimately marry, they tend to do so at similar ages in comparison with those who are unaffiliated and those who are liberal Protestants. Yet some caution is warranted in interpreting these findings. Because the current study was not able to draw fine-grained distinctions between Orthodox and Reform Jews (they are collapsed in the NSFH data set), additional research is needed to explore intra-Judaic variations in the timing of first marriage.

Where liberal and moderate Protestants are concerned, our results were mixed. Our results show no statistical differences between liberal Protestants, Jews, and the unaffiliated in the timing of first marriage. This finding of no difference holds for men and women and is not terribly surprising. We speculate that this finding may be evidence of a converging trend in gender ideology among liberal Protestants, Jews, and the unaffiliated in that these groups are perhaps equally encouraged to pursue an advanced educational degree or to establish a professional career. Factors such as these typically delay marriage, regardless of gender. It is more surprising to note, statistically significant differences do surface when comparing moderate Protestants and their unaffiliated counterparts as well as liberal Protestants. Moderate Protestant women and men marry considerably earlier than those who are not affiliated with any faith tradition and those who identified as liberal Protestants. This finding may reflect the residue of conservative so-called family-first values found among moderate Protestant denominations (e.g., United Methodists).

In short, the findings in the current study generally confirm our initial suspicion concerning religious differences in the timing of first marriage. Denominational differences are indeed apparent concerning the timing of first marriage, lending further credence to the denominational subcultures paradigm. Moreover, quite notably, these differences withstand an array of controls for confounding factors. The strength and persistence of these patterned associations further demonstrate that there are robust and multifaceted linkages between two prominent social institutions, namely, religion and marriage.

Several noteworthy implications and directions for future research emerge from the current study. First, the current study has important implications for research on religious variations in other aspects of family life, such as marital instability and divorce. A great deal of social research demonstrates that early marriage places couples at substantially higher

risk of divorce (Heaton, 2002; White, 1990). Religious variations in the timing of marriage need to be investigated in light of propensities to divorce. It is interesting to note, conservative Protestants and Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) are the two religious groups whose members marry earliest. However, recent surveys<sup>6</sup> demonstrate the conservative Protestants such as Baptists have the highest divorce rates in the nation, whereas Latter-Day Saints (particularly those married in a Mormon temple) are among the least likely to divorce (Lobdell, 2000; [religioustolerance.org](http://religioustolerance.org), 2003). Future research should investigate why conservative Protestants and Latter-Day Saints, both of whom marry quite early, exhibit such different propensities to divorce. It is possible that the individualistic theology and decentralized structure of conservative Protestantism leads to higher divorce rates within this group. The Latter-Day Saint (LDS) Church, on the other hand, has a more communalistic theology, one in which family relationships—and especially marriage—have eternal significance. The structure of the LDS church is also more centralized, such that temple marriages can only be dissolved by divorce degrees sanctioned by the leaders of the church. There are also human capital differences between these two religious groups. Conservative Protestants are less educated on average than their Latter-Day Saint counterparts, with the latter group evincing a more proeducation orientation and higher levels of educational attainment. It is possible that differences in human capital between these early-marrying groups account, in part, for their distinctive divorce rates.

Second, one limitation of the current study entailed the lack of measures for religious beliefs and practices among the NSFH-1 respondents at the time of first marriage. Given this deficiency in the data, we cannot assess how theological beliefs (e.g., views of the Bible) and religious behaviors (e.g., prayer, worship service attendance) might have affected the timing of first marriage independent of denominational affiliation. In the future, data collection efforts should be conducted in a way that enables researchers to explore these relationships.

Third, it is well recognized that marriage timing hinges on the marriage market and the opportunity structure it provides (Oppenheimer, 1988). Given this fact, it is imperative to begin examining how ecological factors such as the supply of marriageable partners influence the timing of first marriage. Taking a cue from the growing body of research comparing homogamous (same-faith) and heterogamous (mixed-faith) unions (Ellison & Bartkowski, 2002; Ellison, Bartkowski, & Anderson, 1999; Kalmijn, 1991; Rebhun, 1999; Shehan, Bock, & Lee, 1990; Xu & Toth, 1997), special attention should be given to how the marriage market may

be defined differently by specific faith traditions. Mindful of the insights generated by the denominational subcultures literature, investigations of religion, marriage markets, and marriage timing should account for the degree of intolerance that specific denominations exhibit toward mixed-faith unions. The most fruitful inquiries might entail exploring the twin impact of cultural forces (e.g., defense of homogamy, tolerance of heterogamy) and ecological factors (e.g., the spatial proximity of marriageable partners in local marriage markets) on marriage timing.

It is entirely possible that ecological factors such as denominational homogeneity could combine with a pronuptialist culture to promote early marriage. For example, the sheer preponderance of Mormons living in Utah may combine with the Latter-Day Saints' promarriage culture and their commitment to homogamous (same-faith) marriage to promote early family formation among adherents of this faith. As such, early marriage may be much more pronounced for Utah Mormons than for those living outside that predominantly Mormon state. Other traditions that valorize homogamous marriage include evangelical Protestants and Orthodox Jews, though they are more geographically dispersed. By contrast, in faith traditions that are more accepting of religious heterogamy (e.g., moderate Protestants) the market of marriageable partners is defined more broadly and inclusively, with this factor potentially contributing to early marriage in such denominations. In short, the next generation of research in this area needs to explore the intersecting influence of cultural and ecological influences on marriage timing.

Finally, an emerging body of research has begun to examine variations in family attitudes and practices within particular faith traditions. Recent work has revealed that various subgroups within conservative Protestantism do not all share the same vision of marriage and family life (Bartkowski, 2001; Bartkowski & Read, 2003; Gallagher, 2003; Gay et al., 1996; Smith, 2000). Intradominational differences toward marriage and family issues have also been exhibited among Catholic laity and Latter-Day Saint adherents (e.g., Beaman, 2001; Dillon, 1999). In this initial study on denominational subcultures and marriage timing, we examined aggregate intergroup tendencies rather than more fine-grained, within-group patterns. However, given the heterogeneity manifested within many faith traditions and the changing contours of religious denominations in America, future research is needed to explore intradenominational cleavages. It is possible, for example, that different types of conservative Protestants (evangelicals, pentecostals, fundamentalists) exhibit quite different patterns of marriage timing, or that entry into marriage among Hispanic Catholics diverges markedly from others who share

their faith. It is also possible that, among those who claim a denominational affiliation, the relatively weaker religious convictions commonly manifested among infrequent worship service attenders place them on a different trajectory for entry into first marriage than more devout adherents within their denomination. To be sure, there are many questions that remain to be answered. Until such work is undertaken, however, there is much to be gained from the knowledge that religion's influence on domestic life is not solely felt after families have been established. The very formation of families through the timing of first marriage is strongly shaped by religious factors.

### NOTES

1. The labor force participation rates of Jewish women in general eclipses that for white American women (Hartman & Hartman, 1996, p. 65). Unfortunately, Hartman and Hartman (1996) did not distinguish between Orthodox and Reform Jewish women in their analysis. This oversight is minor for the purposes of the current study, as the National Survey of Families and Households public use files do not distinguish between different Jewish sects.

2. The National Survey of Families and Households was founded by a grant (HD21009) from the Center for Population Research of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. The survey was designed and carried out at the Center for Demography and Ecology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison under the direction of Larry Bumpass and James Sweet. The fieldwork was done by the Institute for Survey Research at Temple University.

3. In the current literature, *marriage* and *cohabitation* are sometimes defined as competing unions (e.g., Lehrer, 2000; Thornton, Axinn, & Hill, 1992). This conceptualization mandates a specific methodological approach—namely, simultaneous and competing-risk analysis. However, given the traditional (i.e., anticonhabitation) character of several of the religious denominations in our study (evangelicals, Mormons) and the self-proclaimed profamily character of religious organizations, we chose to restrict our study to marriage timing alone. The approach we adopt here has been successfully utilized by others (e.g., Oppenheimer et al., 1997) to study marriage timing. We readily concede that future research on religion and marriage timing might compare entry into marriage and cohabitation. However, the current study focused more pointedly on denominational variations in marriage timing among groups that make up America's most profamily institution. As such, it focused on a different set of issues (denominational subcultures) and laid the foundation necessary for a comparative approach.

4. Given historical trends in marriage timing, cohort-specific analyses for religious variations in marriage timing can be interesting and illuminating. Unfortunately, the small sample sizes for several denominations in the NSFH do not permit us to conduct such analyses here.

5. As noted, birth cohort is used as a control variable in the current study. One reviewer suggested that we break down cohorts among Catholics into those born before and after 1950 to examine the effects of Vatican II and the counterculture on timing of marriage among Catholics. This suggestion is worthwhile. However, we did not pursue it for two reasons. First, birth cohort is used only as a control variable in the current study. A separate study would be necessary to focus on birth cohort as an independent variable and to review the literature on

the cultural influence of Vatican II among Catholics. Relatedly, a focus on the influence of cohort would require testing for interaction effects between denominational affiliation and cohort. These tests would lengthen the article unduly. Second, the focus of this investigation is interdenominational differences in the timing of marriage. Therefore, the examination of intradenominational (i.e., Catholic) cohort variations is beyond the scope of this article. Although such an investigation is worth pursuing, we cannot do so here.

6. Some caution is warranted in interpreting these findings, which have been generated from marketing and research groups rather than scholarly analysis. In the findings generated from such surveys, there are no controls for potentially confounding factors such as age at marriage, education, religious homogamy or heterogamy, and region.

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