

Are There Religious Variations in Marital Infidelity?

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Although previous scholarship has examined the relationship between religious involvement and a wide range of family outcomes, the relationship between religion and extramarital sexual behavior remains understudied. The authors investigate how religious affiliation, participation, and biblical beliefs explain differences in self-reported marital infidelity. This study examines data from the 1991-2004 General Social Surveys and finds that religious factors are associated with the likelihood of marital infidelity. Both church attendance and biblical beliefs are associated with lower odds of self-reported infidelity. Additionally, the authors find substantial denominational variations in the odds of marital infidelity, particularly among those who strongly affiliate with their religious group.

Keywords: *religion; infidelity; marriage; sexual behavior*

Sexuality is an omnipresent concern of religious groups, and religious proscriptions against extramarital sexual activity have been the source of considerable public discourse in the United States in the last decade. Yet few studies have investigated the predictors of marital infidelity, and the

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connection between religious factors and marital infidelity has received limited attention (Treas & Giesen, 2000). Given the importance of sexual infidelity for motivating divorce, domestic violence, marital conflict, and spousal dissatisfaction, the lack of attention devoted by researchers produces a substantial gap in our knowledge about key family relations. Until recently, the lack of data on sexual infidelity limited study in this area; however, the accumulation of data on sexual behavior is beginning to enable more systematic investigations of the association between a variety of social factors and extramarital sexual relations.

A multidimensional set of religious factors has been shown to influence varied aspects of family life, including cohabitation (Thornton, Axinn, & Hill, 1992), household labor and gender roles (Ellison & Bartkowski, 2002), quality of family relationships (Pearce & Axinn, 1998), and many other family-related outcomes. Researchers have given particular attention to the role of religion in shaping marital life such as focuses on marital satisfaction and duration (Booth, Johnson, Branaman, & Sica, 1995; Heaton & Pratt, 1990; Scanzoni & Arnett, 1987), conflicts (Curtis & Ellison, 2002), commitment and dependency (Wilson & Musick, 1996), likelihood of divorce (Call & Heaton, 1997; Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993), domestic violence (Ellison, Bartkowski, & Anderson, 1999), and other important facets of relationship quality. Contemporary studies document the importance of multiple sources of religious influences on family life, examining differences by religious affiliation, participation, and beliefs. Interestingly enough, studies of marital infidelity have yet to examine the association between these diverse aspects of religious involvement and extramarital sexual activity.

Virtually all religious groups and traditions condemn extramarital sexual relations, although they differ in the strength of these norms. Religious elites, especially conservative Protestant leaders, have voiced grave concern about the state of marriage in the United States and have advocated a number of policy reforms, such as covenant marriage, aimed at strengthening marital bonds (Feld, Rossier, & Manning, 2003). Several evangelical religious leaders (e.g., Falwell, Robertson, and Dobson) were particularly vocal in denouncing President Clinton for his extramarital sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky. Affiliation with the sectarian religious groups that provide the basis of support for these elites may well affect sexual behaviors. Religious participation is another potential source of control over marital sexuality because connections to friends and family forged through regular interactions in religious settings may lower opportunities for extramarital sex and raise the likelihood and costs of detection. Finally, beliefs in the infallibility of religious scriptures could play a role in decisions about extramarital sex.

To examine the effects of religious factors on marital infidelity, our study analyzes data from the 1991-2004 General Social Surveys (GSS). The GSS uses a question on self-reported marital infidelity, tapping whether an individual has ever had sexual relations with someone other than his or her spouse while married. Our study makes a unique contribution to the literature in this area in three ways. First, we use a comprehensive measure of religious affiliation to examine denominational variations in the odds of marital infidelity. Second, we investigate the influence of specific forms of religious commitment on the likelihood of infidelity: organizational religious involvement and biblical views. Finally, we examine within-group and between-group denominational variations in the odds of marital infidelity. Specifically, we compare various religious affiliations to one another as well as those members who strongly affiliate with their particular denomination to those with weaker ties to their religious group.

Religious Commitment and Marital Infidelity

Several generations of social scientists have recognized that religious involvement is a multidimensional construct (Idler et al., 2003; Levin, Taylor, & Chatters, 1995; Stark & Glock, 1968). Relying on one measure of religion (e.g., church attendance) often masks the complex relationship between religiosity and family factors. Although certain facets of religious involvement might be linked with positive or desirable outcomes, others will be unrelated or have a negative influence on family structure and functioning (Curtis & Ellison, 2002; Ellison et al., 1999; Pearce & Axinn, 1998). Although there are few empirical guideposts for the present study (see Cochran, Chamlin, Beeghley, & Fenwick, 2004, for a partial exception), there are sound theoretical reasons to expect that multiple dimensions of religious involvement may be linked with marital infidelity.

Religious Affiliation

Religious denominations vary in their emphasis on the importance of sexual purity and adherence to religious prescriptions and proscriptions regarding sexual behavior. Religious groups also differ in their propensity to generate exclusive social networks that could constrain sexual behaviors. Sectarian Christians and Catholics are the most vocal on issues of family and sexuality. Furthermore, these religious groups also tend to generate consolidated social ties among members, discouraging intermarriage and associations with nonmembers (Sherkat, 2004; Sherkat & Wilson, 1995).

Together with strong proscriptions against extramarital sex, we should expect that sectarian Protestants and Catholics will have lower odds of self-reported infidelity.

Proscriptions against extramarital sex are expressed in formal messages from denominations, church leaders, and clergy. For example, certain sectarian faiths, notably the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS; Mormons), have long offered distinctive theological views on marriage. Mormon beliefs regarding the eternal nature of marital and family bonds and the spiritual purposes of conjugality and procreation are cornerstones of Mormon life, especially during the contemporary period (Heaton, 1988; Heaton, Goodman, & Holman, 1994; Shepherd & Shepherd, 1984). Likewise, conservative Protestant and Catholic leadership often stresses a traditional view of marriage, sexuality, and family life, emphasizing scriptural passages that valorize nuclear family arrangements (Bartkowski, 2001; Gallagher, 2003; Gay, Ellison, & Powers, 1996; Hoffmann & Miller, 1997). Moreover, leadership within these conservative religious groups has openly expressed concern over contemporary trends in American family life. Conservative Protestant organizations and luminaries in particular have voiced alarm about high divorce rates, nonmarital cohabitation, and the prospect of gay marriage. For example, James Dobson, head of the organization Focus on the Family, asserts that “the legalization of homosexual marriage will quickly destroy the traditional family.” Often drawing on academic research, Dobson also argues that “marriage when it functions as intended, is good for everyone—for men, for women, for children, for the community, for the nation, and for the world” (Dobson, 2004, p. 17).

Conservative views regarding marriage and family may also be affirmed in informal settings with other coreligionists. Casual discussions with fellow churchgoers regarding appropriate marital and family relationships may reinforce official church doctrines and moral messages presented by clergy. Indeed, evidence suggests that these conservative views are not solely the province of a handful of religious leaders and spokespersons but reflect the attitudes of laity as well. Research suggests that members of conservative religious groups have more traditional views on a variety of sexual attitudes, including premarital sexual activity, homosexual relations, and extramarital sexual behavior (Cochran & Beeghley, 1991; Finlay & Walther, 2003; Hill, Moulton, & Burdette, 2004; Petersen & Donnenwerth, 1997; Roof & McKinney, 1987). Not only are conservative Protestant denominations more restrictive in their attitudes toward sexuality, but also members of these groups exhibit greater homogeneity in their views on such issues compared to members of other religious faiths (Gay et al., 1996).

Members of conservative sects and Catholics may also witness gossip, ostracism, and other forms of social sanctions against persons suspected of sexual improprieties within the church. Groups with consolidated social ties are able to execute normative sanctions on members more forcefully (Sherkat & Wilson, 1995). These informal social sanctions may raise the perceived costs of any sexual dalliance, thereby reducing the odds of infidelity among members of these groups. And marital infidelity is more likely to be viewed as a moral transgression, a sign of flawed character, within conservative religious communities compared to other types of religious groups (Lupfer, de Paola, Brock, & Clement, 1994), which may heighten the stigma and internal discomfort associated with the prospect of straying. Based on the arguments presented thus far, we expect to find the following:

Hypothesis 1a: Members of conservative religious affiliations (conservative Protestant, conservative sectarian faiths) and Catholics will be less likely to commit marital infidelity compared to those with no religious affiliation.

Although conservative religious groups may place greater emphasis on sexual purity, there are reasons to believe that even members of more moderate religious affiliations may display reduced odds of marital infidelity when compared to those with no religious affiliation. First, sexual fidelity is a core belief of all mainstream religious organizations. Even among religious organizations that have adopted (or at least debated) more liberal views toward other issues regarding sexuality (e.g., ordaining homosexual clergy, marrying gay and lesbian couples), church positions on sexual exclusiveness within the bonds of marriage have not been debated. Second, as discussed in greater detail below, exposure to religious messages is associated with more conservative social attitudes, even within liberal religious denominations. This finding lends some evidence that all Christian denominations support the sanctity of the family life, including restricting sexual activity to the bonds of marriage (Hertel & Hughes, 1987). This leads to a broader hypothesis regarding religious affiliation and marital infidelity than the one presented above. Based on the arguments presented thus far, we expect to find the following:

Hypothesis 1b: Those respondents who report a religious affiliation will be less likely to commit marital infidelity compared to those with no religious affiliation.

Organizational Religious Involvement

Religious participation places individuals in regular contact with coreligionists, and these ties help strengthen normative prescriptions and proscriptions.

Furthermore, regular religious participation exposes congregants to religious messages reinforcing the importance of marital fidelity and the supernatural consequences of deviation. Participation is also a marker of individual commitment to religiosity, and commitment to religious life should foster adherence to religious doctrine. Religious attendance signifies embeddedness within congregational social networks, which could imply the potential for behavioral monitoring, detection of counternormative behavior, and possible social or religious sanctions (Sherkat & Wilson, 1995). Furthermore, regular participation is very often a family activity (Myers, 1996; Sherkat, 1998; Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, & Waite, 1995), which may stimulate positive emotional bonds if occurring in a voluntary setting (Collins, 2005; Lawler, 1992).

Behavioral monitoring within religious communities may also limit the exposure of members to social environments that are conducive to cheating (e.g., time spent with nonbelievers, in bars and adult entertainment establishments, and in certain types of occupational activities). Additionally, congregational networks may also involve positive social activities (e.g., family activities, charitable pursuits) that may reduce the time or energy available for flirting or adultery. Church attendance also provides regular exposure to general messages about the sanctity of marriage and the merits of sexual restraint. Furthermore, previous research suggests that religious participation is shown to influence moral attitudes toward sexuality, even among members of less conservative denominations (Hertel & Hughes, 1987; Roof & McKinney, 1987; Sherkat & Ellison, 1997). These studies suggest that regular churchgoers receive "moral messages" through sermons and other congregational communications (Cochran & Beeghley, 1991; Cochran et al., 2004; Petersen & Donnenwerth, 1997; Sherkat & Ellison, 1997), which may in turn influence sexual behavior.

In addition to tapping the amount of exposure to religious norms and beliefs, church attendance may also indicate the depth of one's commitment to religious doctrine and community. The level of participation within the religious community may reflect one's dedication to the faith and, by extension, one's allegiance to the normative structures and worldviews of the religious group. For many religious groups, this worldview includes a strong commitment to promoting and strengthening the family as a cornerstone of social, community, and spiritual life. Through rituals, sermons, Sunday school lessons, and informal social interactions, religious congregations often emphasize the importance of family life for personal development and spiritual growth. These mechanisms may reinforce beliefs about the sanctity of marriage while defining the boundaries of appropriate marital conduct and validating individuals' attempts at successfully fulfilling

their marital roles (Ellison et al., 1999). Based on these arguments, we expect the following:

Hypothesis 2a: Frequency of church attendance will be inversely associated with the likelihood of marital infidelity.

It is well established that mean levels of attendance vary across religious groups. It is possible that controlling for frequency of religious service attendance may mediate any observed denominational differences in patterns. This finding would suggest that it is general religious embeddedness and/or commitment, rather than anything about specific denominational belief systems, that dampens tendencies toward marital infidelity. Specifically, persons who belong to more conservative churches (conservative Protestants, sectarian groups) attend services more often than members of more liberal groups, who in turn attend more often than religiously unaffiliated persons. Therefore, we expect to find the following:

Hypothesis 2b: Although religious affiliates will be less likely to commit adultery compared to those with no religious affiliation, this association may be reduced or eliminated with control for the frequency of church attendance.

Biblical Views

Beyond the influence of religious affiliation and participation, individuals' religious beliefs may play a determinative role in sexual relations. The role of beliefs about the nature and authority of the Bible are pivotal for explaining a host of religious influences on family life. A growing body of evidence links more orthodox or conservative views regarding scriptural interpretation with distinct moral positions on a host of issues, including many that involve family life and sexuality (Burdette, Ellison, & Hill, 2005; Ellison & Sherkat, 1993; Sherkat & Ellison, 1997). And to be sure, the Bible has much to say about marital relationships, adultery and fornication, and the nature and purposes of human sexuality. Many, possibly most, adherents of Judeo-Christian religions are likely to be familiar with the general tenor of these passages, if not with the actual biblical verses themselves.

Perhaps most important, both Old Testament (e.g., Exodus 20:14, Leviticus 20:10, Deuteronomy 5:18) and New Testament (e.g., Matthew 5:27, Luke 18:20, 1 Corinthians 6:9-10) passages condemn marital infidelity as a cardinal sin. Several passages suggest that adultery is morally comparable to theft and murder, and those who commit acts of infidelity are at risk of eternal damnation. These clear denunciations of sexual infidelity are complemented by messages extolling the sanctity of marital bonds and

drawing attention to the spiritual significance of marriage (e.g., Genesis 2:24, Hebrews 13:4, Jeremiah 29:6). Moreover, the Bible contains numerous passages that communicate a general message of sexual restraint, reserving physical intimacy for married couples only (e.g., Colossians 3:5, Mark 7:21, 1 Corinthians 6:18-20). And in the view of some conservative religious leaders, these passages teach that God intends human sexuality primarily, even exclusively, for the purpose of procreation. In sum, for persons who regard the Bible as a sacred text, these and many other passages offer strong moral guidance concerning the avoidance of improper sexual relationships, particularly adultery.

Although most Christians are aware of the basic nature of biblical teachings regarding sexuality, individual adherents differ in their familiarity with such passages and in the emphasis placed on them. One reason for such variations among Judeo-Christian adherents has to do with the complexity and multivocality of the Bible. Like many religious texts, it contains a wealth of messages about a host of topics, which allows for significant variations in lay understandings, points of emphasis, and other interpretive matters. Thus, previous researchers have drawn attention to the roles of “interpretive communities,” which refers to extended networks of persons who share common assumptions about the nature of a given text and the ground rules via which the text should be interpreted (Fish, 1980). In the case of the Bible, such communities often consist of theologians, pastors, and influential laypersons who develop and disseminate shared understandings of scripture and its applicability to human affairs, social and political issues, and other matters (Bartkowski, 1996; Boone, 1989).

For example, those who regard the Bible as the inerrant or literal Word of God tend to share more than common beliefs about interpretive guidelines; they also tend to emphasize the central themes of individual sin (perhaps especially sexual sin), divine judgment, repentance, and personal salvation. Other persons, for example, those who adopt more metaphorical or historical-contextual approaches to understanding the Bible, may place somewhat less emphasis on these themes and the key scriptural passages that illustrate them most vividly. Instead, nonliteralists may assign proportionally greater weight to biblical teachings concerning social (in)justice, forgiveness, and other positive virtues. This line of argument suggests two related hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3a: Persons who embrace biblical literalism will be much less likely to engage in marital infidelity than persons who do not regard the Bible as a sacred text.

Hypothesis 3b: Persons who believe the Bible is the inspired (but not necessarily literal) Word of God will also be somewhat less likely to practice adultery than their counterparts for whom the Bible lacks religious significance.

Data and Measures

Data

To test these hypotheses, we analyze pooled data from the 1991-2004 GSS conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC; Davis & Smith, 1996). Beginning in 1994, the GSS has been conducted in even-numbered years only. This is a valuable data source because the GSS is a nationally representative sample of U.S. adults and contains many relevant religious items, along with a question concerning marital infidelity. The GSS uses a split-ballot design in data collection to maximize the number of items included in each year. As a result of this design, however, many items (except for a group of core questions that are included on all surveys) have been asked of only a randomly selected subset of GSS respondents. For example, the item measuring attitudes toward the Bible is asked of only two thirds of the respondents. Although this split-ballot design reduces the available sample for our analyses, the fact that these ballots are randomly assigned minimizes the potential for sample bias. Furthermore, we have limited our sample to those respondents who are currently or were previously married.

Dependent Variable: Marital Infidelity

Marital infidelity is measured via responses to the question “Have you ever had sex with someone other than your husband or wife while you were married?” Approximately 17% of our sample reported having had an extra-marital sexual relationship.

Key Independent Variables: Religious Involvement

We measure several distinct aspects of religious involvement. Using a modified version of the coding scheme developed by Roof and McKinney (1987; see the appendix), religious affiliation is divided into the following categories: conservative Baptist, Holiness or Pentecostal, other conservative Protestant, moderate Protestant, liberal Protestant, Catholic, other faith, and no religious affiliation (the reference category).

We also include a measure of organizational religious involvement: frequency of church attendance. The frequency of attendance at religious services is gauged via the following item: "How often do you attend religious services?" Responses range from *never* (0) to *several times a week* (8).

Finally, we include a measure of belief about the Bible. Biblical beliefs are measured using the question "Which of these statements comes closest to describing your feelings about the Bible?: 'The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally,' 'The Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word,' or 'The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by man.'" This item was recoded into three dummy variables, one identifying persons who view the Bible as the literal word of God; one identifying those who regard the Bible as the inspired word of God; and a third category that indicates believing that the Bible is not a divine text, which is the reference category for our analyses.

Background Factors

Previous research establishes a number of individual-level sociodemographic characteristics as correlates or predictors of marital infidelity (Choi, Catania, & Dolcini, 1994; Leigh, Temple, & Trocki, 1993; Smith, 1994; Treas & Giesen, 2000). We can be confident of our conclusions regarding possible religious variations in infidelity only if we include statistical adjustments for these potentially confounding factors. Therefore, our models include controls for the following variables: gender (1 = *female*, 0 = *male*), race and/or ethnicity (1 = *African American*, 1 = *other minority*, 0 = *non-Hispanic White*), age (measured in single years), education (measured in years), full-time employment (1 = *employed full-time*, 0 = *other work status*), previous marriage (1 = *divorced*, 0 = *no previous marriage*), children (1 = *respondent has at least one child*, 0 = *no children*), and urban residence (1 = *urban resident*, 0 = *nonurban resident*). Year of the survey is also controlled in all models.

Results

Sample Characteristics

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for all variables used in these analyses. As noted above, approximately 17% of GSS respondents reported engaging in extramarital affairs at some point during their marriage. Of the

total sample, roughly 32% are members of conservative Protestant faiths (19% Baptist, 4% Pentecostal or Holiness, 9% miscellaneous other fundamentalist or evangelical churches), and another 2% come from nontraditional conservative or sectarian groups. Approximately 16% are members of moderate Protestant groups, and 8% come from liberal Protestant denominations. The remainders of GSS respondents are Catholic (26%), are members of other religious faiths (4%), or report no religion at all (13%). The average GSS respondent reports attending religious services sporadically, slightly less than once per month. Roughly one third of the respondents (33%) believe the Bible should be interpreted as the literal word of God, whereas most others (51%) hold that the Bible is the inspired word of God; the remainder (16%) accords no sacred significance to the Bible.

With regard to other sample characteristics, Table 1 indicates that respondents are overwhelmingly (non-Hispanic) White (85%), with minorities of African Americans (10%) and other racial and ethnic backgrounds (5% combined). The majority of this sample are women (59%), are employed full-time (54%), and have children (86%; this figure includes adult children). A substantial minority have been divorced at least once (42%), and few reside in urban areas (14%). Finally, the average respondent is approximately 49 years of age, with slightly more than 1 year of college education.

Multivariate Results

Table 2 displays the estimated net effects of religious involvement and covariates on the odds of having committed adultery. Models are organized as follows: Model 1 (the baseline model) includes nonreligious predictors such as sociodemographic factors and other key variables. Model 2 adds a series of dummy variables to capture religious affiliation. Model 3 adds our measure of organizational religious involvement (i.e., frequency of attendance). Model 4 replaces church attendance with beliefs about the Bible. The final model, Model 5, includes all of our measures of religious involvement simultaneously.

These results suggest important religious differentials in marital infidelity. First, Model 2 reveals several notable denominational patterns, lending partial support to Hypothesis 1a. Those who are members of conservative religious affiliations (conservative Protestant, conservative sectarian faiths) and Catholics report reduced odds of marital infidelity compared to those with no religious affiliation. For example, Baptists display an approximate 33% reduction in the odds of infidelity, whereas

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics (*N* = 7,791)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Dependent variable			
Marital infidelity	0.17	—	0-1
Religion variables			
Baptist	0.19	—	0-1
Holiness/Pentecostal	0.04	—	0-1
Other conservative Protestant	0.09	—	0-1
Moderate Protestant	0.16	—	0-1
Liberal Protestant	0.08	—	0-1
Catholic	0.26	—	0-1
Nontraditional conservative	0.02	—	0-1
Other religious faiths	0.04	—	0-1
No religious affiliation	0.13	—	0-1
Church attendance	3.92	2.73	0-8
Bible as literal Word	0.33	—	0-1
Bible as inspired Word	0.51	—	0-1
Strong religious affiliation	0.39	—	0-1
Sociodemographics/controls			
Year of survey	3.55	2.02	0-7
African American	0.10	—	0-1
Other minority	0.05	—	0-1
Female	0.59	—	0-1
Age	48.98	15.98	18-89
Full-time employment	0.54	—	0-1
Children	0.86	—	0-1
Divorced	0.42	—	0-1
Education	13.26	2.93	0-20
Urban resident	0.14	—	0-1

Catholics display roughly a 32% reduction compared to their nonaffiliated counterparts. However, affiliating with a mainline religious denomination is also associated with reduced odds of infidelity, lending partial support to Hypothesis 1b. Moderate Protestants display a 37% reduction in the odds of infidelity. Likewise, liberal Protestants show roughly a 31% reduction in the odds of cheating. Affiliating with a nontraditional conservative religious group (e.g., Mormon, Jehovah's Witness) or a non-Christian faith is not associated with a reduction in the odds of marital infidelity.¹

Consistent with Hypothesis 2a, the frequency of religious attendance is inversely associated with the likelihood of marital infidelity. According to Model 3, each 1-unit increment in attendance, which is measured on a

Table 2
Estimated Net Effects of Religious Affiliation, Attendance, Belief,
and Covariates on the Odds of Infidelity ($N = 7,791$)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Sociodemographics					
Year of survey	1.011	1.003	1.004	1.007	1.007
African American	1.333**	1.404***	1.565***	1.450***	1.574***
Other minority	1.046	1.032	1.066	1.070	1.090
Female	0.488***	0.502***	0.518***	0.517***	0.527***
Age	0.998	0.999	1.000	0.998	0.999
Full-time employment	1.143*	1.154	1.156	1.160*	1.160*
Children	1.171	1.205*	1.230*	1.235*	1.250*
Divorced	3.132***	3.057***	2.873***	3.005***	2.868***
Education	1.009	1.007	1.018	0.993	1.005
Urban resident	1.212*	1.186*	1.176	1.167	1.163
Religion					
Baptist		0.674***	0.862	0.849	0.989
Holiness/Pentecostal		0.633**	0.907	0.848	1.070
Other conservative Protestant		0.547***	0.768	0.687*	0.865
Moderate Protestant		0.627***	0.768*	0.733**	0.838
Liberal Protestant		0.694*	0.845	0.777	0.892
Catholic		0.679***	0.871	0.769*	0.920
Nontraditional conservative		0.760	1.055	0.929	1.168
Other religious faiths		0.791	0.958	0.874	0.998
Church attendance			0.917***		0.932***
Bible as literal Word				0.540***	0.617***
Bible as inspired Word				0.717***	0.766**
Intercept	-2.073	-1.748	-1.860	-1.375	-1.545
Likelihood ratio χ^2	525.781	553.718***	594.410***	589.237***	614.932***
<i>df</i>	10	18	19	20	21

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

9-point (0-8) scale, is associated with roughly an 8% decrement in the odds of adultery ($OR = .917, p < .001$). Thus, the odds of infidelity for persons who attend services several times per week (who receive a score of 8) are roughly 66% lower than the odds for persons who never attend services: $(1 - .917) \times (8 - 0) = .66$. Furthermore, religious attendance appears to mediate most of the denominational patterns identified above. Lending some support to Hypothesis 2b, once levels of attendance are held constant, only moderate Protestants ($OR = .768, p < .05$) remain distinct from those with no religious affiliation in their odds of marital infidelity.

We also find support for Hypothesis 3a in our analyses. In Model 4, compared with persons who do not regard the Bible as a sacred text, those who believe it is the literal Word of God are approximately 46% less likely to report having committed adultery. In accordance with Hypothesis 3b, we find that those who regard the Bible as the inspired Word of God are about 28% less likely to have engaged in marital infidelity, compared to those respondents who view the Bible as a nondivine text. In the full model (Model 5), with all religious variables included simultaneously, variables indicating religious attendance ($OR = .932, p < .001$), viewing the Bible as the literal word of God ($OR = .617, p < .001$), and viewing the Bible as the inspired word of God ($OR = .766, p < .01$) remain statistically significant predictors of infidelity; however, the effect for moderate Protestant is no longer significant.

Although they are not the main focus of our study, given the dearth of evidence about the correlates of marital infidelity, several additional findings merit brief mention. Compared with men, women are only approximately half as likely to report committing adultery; compared with non-Hispanic Whites, African Americans are 33% to 57% more likely to be unfaithful. Respondents with children, respondents employed full-time, and—not surprisingly, perhaps—those who have been divorced are substantially more likely to report having engaged in one or more adulterous relationships. Although there is an initial effect for being an urban resident ($OR = 1.212, p < .05$), this effect appears to be mediated by religious factors. There are few differences in infidelity by age or education; similarly, the nonsignificant coefficient for survey year indicates that there is no clear trend in the likelihood of infidelity across the GSS survey period examined here.²

Strength of Affiliation

Before closing the door on Hypotheses 1a and 1b, we examined whether denominational influences are confined to persons who are strong affiliates of their religious traditions. Although denominational patterns appear to be explained by other religion variables, we investigated the possibility that subgroup effects are restricted to those who strongly identify with their denomination. Those who identify very closely with their chosen faith may embrace church doctrines and congregational norms more fully. We used responses to the GSS RELITEN item (“Would you call yourself a strong [name of religious affiliation], or a not very strong [name of religious affiliation]?”) to reclassify the members of each denominational group. This approach revealed several noteworthy patterns.³

The estimated net effects of this more detailed religious affiliation measure on the odds of marital infidelity are presented in Table 3. Briefly, Model 1 includes only the refined affiliation categories with adjustments for sociodemographic controls; subsequent models add controls for attendance (Model 2) and biblical interpretation (Model 3). In Model 1 of Table 3, with the exception of two categories—members of nontraditional conservative faiths (i.e., Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses) and members of “other” religious faiths—the strong members of each religious group are less likely to have committed adultery than their religiously unaffiliated counterparts. Additionally, weak Baptists, moderate Protestants, and Catholics display reduced odds of marital infidelity compared to those with no religious affiliation.

Although controls for church attendance and biblical beliefs reduce the impact of strong affiliation on the odds of marital infidelity somewhat, many of these groups remain distinct from those with no religious affiliation in their likelihood of marital infidelity. Those respondents who identify as a strong Baptist, a strong “other” conservative Protestant, a strong moderate Protestant, or a strong Catholic all display reduced odds of infidelity compared to their unaffiliated counterparts. Additionally, identifying as a weak moderate Protestant is associated with reduced odds of infidelity compared to those respondents with no religious affiliation. Although there were initial effects for being a strong liberal Protestant, a strong Holiness or Pentecostal, a weak Baptist, and a weak Catholic compared with holding no religious affiliation, these effects were no longer significant once controls for the additional measures of religious involvement were included.

Additional Within- and Between-Group Variations by Affiliation

In addition to comparing the odds of infidelity for each category of religious affiliate solely with those of nonaffiliates, we also estimated a series of logistic regression models using each affiliation subgroup as the reference category. These additional analyses allow us to determine which pairwise comparisons—that is, within-group and between-group comparisons—reflect statistically significant differences. The results of these ancillary models are displayed in Table 4.

In this summary table, “0” denotes a nonsignificant comparison, “-” indicates that the odds of infidelity are lower for the row group compared to the column group, and “+” reflects greater odds of infidelity among the row group compared to the column group. Thus, for example, the “-” in

Table 3
Estimated Net Effects of Detailed Religious Affiliation, Attendance, Belief, and Covariates on the Odds of Infidelity ($N = 7,791$)^a

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Strong Baptist	0.527***	0.700*	0.670**
Strong Holiness/Pentecostal	0.419***	0.596	0.546*
Strong other conservative Protestant	0.371***	0.517**	0.470***
Strong moderate Protestant	0.486***	0.630**	0.592**
Strong liberal Protestant	0.583*	0.765	0.673
Strong Catholic	0.479***	0.647**	0.559***
Strong nontraditional conservative	0.663	0.950	0.801
Strong other religious faiths	0.828	1.017	0.938
Weak Baptist	0.770*	0.873	0.916
Weak Holiness/Pentecostal	0.905	1.089	1.144
Weak other conservative Protestant	0.780	0.928	0.914
Weak moderate Protestant	0.689**	0.768*	0.772 [†]
Weak liberal Protestant	0.731	0.807	0.796
Weak Catholic	0.788*	0.900	0.863
Weak nontraditional conservative	0.862	0.978	1.016
Weak other religious faiths	0.725	0.793	0.762
Intercept	-1.851	-1.890	-1.504
Likelihood ratio χ^2	593.748	611.024***	618.965***
<i>df</i>	26	27	28

a. All models include control for year of survey, race, gender, age, employment status, children, divorce, urban residence, and years of education. Model 2 adds a control for church attendance, and Model 3 controls for biblical beliefs.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

column 2 of row 1 conveys that strong Baptists are less prone to report cheating on their spouses than weak Baptists, even after statistical adjustments for covariates. Conversely, the “+” in column 3 of row 2 indicates that weak Baptists are more inclined to commit acts of infidelity compared to strong members of Pentecostal or Holiness churches.

Based on these analyses, several empirical patterns are evident. First, there are no significant differences among the various strong affiliate groups (e.g., between strong Catholics vs. strong Baptists), nor are there any meaningful differences among the various weak affiliate groups (e.g., between weak Pentecostal/Holiness members vs. weak liberal Protestants). Within most affiliate groups, the odds of infidelity are lower among strong members compared to weak members. However, there are two exceptions

Table 4
Estimated Net Effects of Religious Affiliation on the Odds of Marital Infidelity:
Within-Group and Between-Group Comparisons (N = 7,791)

	Other													
	Baptist		Holiness/ Pentecostal		Conservative Protestant		Moderate Protestant		Liberal Protestant		Catholic		Nontraditional Conservative	
	Strong	Weak	Strong	Weak	Strong	Weak	Strong	Weak	Strong	Weak	Strong	Weak	Strong	Weak
Strong Baptist	X	-	0	-	0	-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Weak Baptist		X	+	0	+	0	+	0	0	0	+	0	0	0
Strong Holiness/ Pentecostal			X	-	0	-	0	0	0	-	0	-	0	0
Weak Holiness/ Pentecostal				X	+	0	+	0	0	0	+	0	0	0
Strong other conservative Protestant					X	-	0	-	0	-	0	-	0	-
Weak other conservative Protestant							X	+	0	0	0	+	0	0
Strong moderate Protestant								X	-	0	-	0	-	0
Weak moderate Protestant									X	0	0	+	0	0

(continued)

Table 4 (continued)

	Baptist		Holiness/ Pentecostal		Other Conservative Protestant		Moderate Protestant		Liberal Protestant		Catholic		Nontraditional Conservative	
	Strong	Weak	Strong	Weak	Strong	Weak	Strong	Weak	Strong	Weak	Strong	Weak	Strong	Weak
Strong liberal Protestant									X	0	0	0	0	0
Weak liberal Protestant										X	+	0	0	0
Strong Catholic											X	-	0	0
Weak Catholic												X	0	0
Strong nontraditional conservative													X	0
Weak nontraditional conservative														X

Note: - = reduced odds of infidelity; + = increased odds of infidelity; 0 = nonsignificant relationship. All differences are significant at the $p < .05$ level or greater and include controls for year of survey, race, gender, age, employment status, children, divorce, urban residence, and education.

to this general pattern: liberal Protestants and nontraditional conservatives. Within each of these denominational clusters, there is no difference in the odds of infidelity between self-described strong and weak members. Finally, in the majority of comparisons across denominational groupings (12 of 21, or 57.1%), the odds of infidelity are lower among strong versus weak affiliates.

Among the exceptions to this general pattern are the following comparisons, all of which are nonsignificant: (a) strong Baptists versus weak moderate Protestants, weak liberal Protestants, and weak nontraditional conservatives; (b) strong Pentecostal/Holiness members versus weak moderate Protestants and weak nontraditional conservatives; (c) strong liberal Protestants versus weak Catholics and weak nontraditional conservatives; and (d) strong Catholics versus weak nontraditional conservatives. The tendency for nonsignificant relationships to emerge in comparisons involving liberal Protestants and nontraditional conservatives appears to result partly, but not entirely, from the relatively small cell sizes in these categories.

Discussion

Despite growing interest in the issue of marital infidelity and the connections between the pivotal social institutions of religion and family, few empirical studies have examined religious variations in extramarital sexual liaisons. Our study has addressed this gap in the research literature by outlining a set of theoretical arguments relating multiple dimensions of religious involvement with infidelity and testing relevant hypotheses using data from the pooled NORC GSS. The findings confirm that religious involvement is linked with extramarital sexual activity in several potentially important ways.

First, we find that with the exception of two religious groups (nontraditional conservatives and non-Christian faiths), holding any religious affiliation is associated with reduced odds of marital infidelity compared to those with no religious affiliation. Although these effects appear to be explained by variations in attendance and biblical views, a more complex story emerges once these groups are separated by strength of affiliation. Strong members of Baptist, "other" conservative Protestant, moderate Protestant, and Catholic groups all display reduced odds of marital infidelity, despite controls for other measures of religious involvement, compared to those respondents with no religious affiliation. Additionally, weakly affiliating moderate Protestants exhibit reduced odds of sexual infidelity when compared to nonaffiliates.

Second, as expected, frequency of religious attendance is inversely associated with the likelihood of having engaged in infidelity. This pattern is roughly linear (monotonic) across levels of attendance. This robust protective effect may be due to several factors. Regular participation in worship services may reinforce religious plausibility structures and belief systems; thus, persons who internalize these religious values and norms may be dissuaded from indulging any temptation. Additionally, embeddedness within congregational networks, a likely byproduct of service attendance, may discourage infidelity by (a) enhancing marital quality through programs, counseling, formal and informal social supports, opportunities for couples' activities, and other mechanisms; (b) exposing members to moral messages via official church pronouncements and teachings, sermons, religious education, and informal exchanges with coreligionists; (c) increasing the risk of surveillance and possible detection of infidelity by church members; (d) rewarding positive marital models and sanctioning (e.g., gossip and ostracism, formal condemnation) deviants; and (e) limiting exposure to social environments that might facilitate extramarital sexual activity. Although each of these mechanisms may be at work, given the magnitude of the inverse attendance–infidelity association, future research might profitably work to identify the underlying causes of this link.

Third, our findings suggest that specific theological beliefs, specifically views about the Bible, are also directly related to infidelity. Persons who agree that the Bible is the literal word of God are less prone to engage in marital infidelity than their counterparts who ascribe no sacred significance to the Bible, and this relationship persists even with controls for religious affiliation and frequency of attendance at services. Likewise, persons who regard the Bible as the inspired (but not literal) word of God are also less inclined toward infidelity than nonbelievers. Our findings suggest that such biblical beliefs may translate into greater resistance to sexual temptation on the part of married persons. This suggests that doctrines of moral conservatism and restraint are associated with real differences in personal behavior rather than simply beliefs.

In addition, it bears emphasizing that the key relationships between religious involvement and marital infidelity are similar across a broad array of population subgroups. We tested a series of cross-product interaction terms to see whether these relationships varied by other key variables (see Note 2). These associations do not vary by gender, race or ethnicity, socioeconomic or family background, or place of residence. Furthermore, there is no evidence of trends in the magnitude or direction of links between religious factors and infidelity; at least for the past 10 to 15 years, there are no signs that religious

variations in extramarital sexual activity are changing or diminishing. The relative consistency of our findings makes it particularly important to understand the processes and mechanisms that underlie these associations.

Several important limitations of this research underscore the need for caution in interpreting these findings and the need for further research into the links between religion and marital infidelity. First and most important, the cross-sectional nature of the GSS data and the wording of the item tapping infidelity make it impossible to establish the causal direction of these empirical associations. Rather, our study has identified significant patterns or associations between religious involvement and extramarital sexual activity. Although it seems unlikely that the associations reported here are spurious, it is plausible that they are bidirectional in nature. For example, consistent with research on the links between religion and cohabitation (Thornton et al., 1992), it is conceivable that religious factors influence the likelihood of adultery, which in turn affects religious involvement (e.g., perhaps diminishing religious attendance or biblical literalism). Such a causal process could result in overestimation of the possible religious influence on infidelity in cross-sectional data. Although we are aware of no existing cohort-based data that will allow adjudication of these issues, it should be an urgent priority for future research.

Moreover, research of this kind necessarily relies on self-reports of infidelity, and some skepticism about the reliability of such data may be warranted. However, despite some allegations to the contrary, studies have turned up little clear association between religiosity (especially the kinds of religious variables considered in this study) and the tendency to give biased, socially desirable responses. At least one recent, thorough study of this issue among young adults argues strongly against such a view (Regnerus & Smith, 2005). Nevertheless, it would be helpful for future studies to rule out obvious sources of response bias in work on marital infidelity among adults.

In addition to addressing these issues, we believe that further investigation of religion and infidelity should focus on the following areas. First, although our results identify variations by the religious affiliation, practice, and belief of the respondent, recent studies also highlight the potential importance of religious homo/heterogamy and (dis)similarity among partners in shaping patterns of marital quality, disputes, violence, and divorce. It is certainly plausible that religious differences or discord in relationships may increase the likelihood of adultery as well. Unfortunately, between 1994 and 2004, the GSS eliminated survey items on the religious affiliation and attendance of spouses, precluding consideration of this issue in our study.

Second, if the associations reported here indeed reflect causal relationships, it is important to clarify the underlying processes via which religious attendance, beliefs, and subculture(s) may affect the likelihood of adultery. Earlier we outlined a series of potential mechanisms within religious communities and persons that may be involved. In addition to these factors, it is also possible that the variables examined here—affiliation, attendance, and belief—are distal variables, imprecise markers for more proximal aspects of religious or spiritual life. For example, Mahoney and colleagues (1999) have discussed the potential role of the sanctification of marital relationships, that is, the attribution of sacred or divine characteristics to one's partner and/or relationship. Persons (or couples) who imbue their marital bonds with such traits, or who perceive the sacred within their relationship, may be less likely to seek extramarital liaisons. Another possibility is that certain styles or practices of religious coping, for example, those that invoke a personal relationship or ongoing interaction with a divine other, may foster more positive resolution of marital stress or conflict, shape healthy lifestyle choices, and deter infidelity (Pargament, 1997). Studies that incorporate these and other functional or content-based facets of religion and spirituality may cast fresh light on this neglected area.

Finally, in addition to exploring possible religious influences on marital (in)fidelity, researchers might profitably investigate the role of religion in the aftermath of infidelity. For example, religious (or related) beliefs about the sanctity of marriage could exacerbate the sense of betrayal and desecration of a once-sacred relationship (Pargament, Magyar, Benore, & Mahoney, 2005). This could make it difficult or impossible (or even undesirable) to restore shattered bonds. Or religious considerations could lead partners to remain together out of obligation. A third important possibility is that religious convictions about repentance and forgiveness—perhaps incorporated in interventions—could be helpful in mending and sustaining relationships that have been tarnished by infidelity (Rye et al., 2005).

In sum, despite the limitations of this study, we have found several notable and robust associations between multiple dimensions of religious involvement and marital infidelity in a nationwide sample of adults. Given the intrinsic importance of this issue and the ostensibly rising rates and changing patterns of adultery among the U.S. population, the possible role of religious factors in this arena clearly warrants careful investigation. Future work along the lines sketched above promises to clarify and extend our knowledge about this neglected area.

Appendix

Classification of Denominations

Baptist

National Baptist Convention of America
National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc.
Southern Baptist Convention
Other Baptist churches
Baptist, don't know which
Free Will Baptist
Missionary Baptist
Primitive Baptist

Pentecostal/Holiness

Assembly of God
Holiness (Nazarene)
Nazarene
Church of God in Christ
Church of God in Christ Holiness
Holiness; Church of Holiness
Pentecostal Assembly of God
Pentecostal Church of God
Pentecostal
Pentecostal Holiness; Holiness Pentecostal
Holiness Church of God
Charismatic
Pentecostal Apostolic
Apostolic Faith
Zion Union
Apostolic Christian
Apostolic Church
Sanctified; Sanctification

Other Conservative Protestant

Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod
Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Other Presbyterian churches
Independent Bible; Bible; Bible Fellowship
New Testament Christian
Christian and Missionary Alliance

Advent Christian
Spiritualist
Free Methodist
Brethren Church; Brethren
United Brethren; United Brethren in Christ
Independent
Open Bible
Church of Christ
Churches of God (except with Christ and Holiness)
Community Church
Covenant
Dutch Reform
Evangelical; Evangelist
Evangelist Free Church
First Church
First Christian Disciples of Christ
First Christian
Full Gospel
Four Square Gospel
Reformed Church of Christ
Salvation Army
Seventh Day Adventist
Wesleyan
Disciples of God
Other Fundamentalist
American Reform
Grace Brethren
Worldwide Church of God
Evangelical United Brethren
Christian Calvary Chapel
Christian Tabernacle
Laotian Christian
No denomination given or nondenominational church⁴

Moderate Protestant

American Baptist Association
American Baptist Churches in the United States
African Methodist Episcopal Church
African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church
United Methodist Church
Other Methodist churches
Methodist, don't know which

American Lutheran Church
Lutheran Church in America
Other Lutheran churches
Evangelical Lutheran
Lutheran, don't know which
Moravian
Baptist (Northern)
Christ Adelprians
Disciples of Christ
Reformed
Reformed United Church of Christ

Liberal Protestant

Presbyterian Church in the United States
United Presbyterian Church in the United States
Presbyterian Church (United States)
Presbyterian, don't know which
Episcopal Church
Congregationalist; First Congregationalist
Unitarian; Universalist
United Church of Christ

Catholic

Nontraditional Conservative

Jehovah's Witnesses
Latter-Day Saints (LDS)
LDS—Mormon
LDS—Jesus Christ; Church of Jesus LDS
Mormon

Other Religious Faiths

Jewish
Religious Science
Mind Science
Mennonite Brethren
Friends
Mennonite
Quaker
Amish

United Church; Unity Church
Unity
Unity School of Christianity
Buddhism
Hinduism
Other Eastern
Moslem/Islam
Orthodox Christian
Native American
Internondenominational

No Religious Affiliation

Notes

1. We entertained the possibility that denominational subcultures may be obscured by differences between lifetime members and switchers, that is, persons who changed denominations in adulthood. For example, it is conceivable that certain faiths (e.g., conservative or sectarian churches) may attract persons who are seeking repentance and lifestyle changes; such persons may join conservative groups following personal crises, which might include adultery. If this is the case, then it could inflate the proportion of members of conservative groups who report engaging in extramarital affairs. Thus, we examined differences between “lifers” and “switchers” in detail, but this did not alter our main findings regarding denominational variations.

2. Along with the models described above, we undertook additional analyses to investigate whether the estimated net effects of religious attendance and biblical beliefs in Table 2 may vary across year, gender, race and ethnicity, age, socioeconomic status, or other respondent background characteristics. To this end, we added cross-product interaction terms to the full model (Model 5) in Table 2. However, no significant contingent effects surfaced in these models; the patterns discussed above are robust across a wide array of population subgroups.

3. We also investigated denominational differences by regular church service attendance and biblical beliefs, and we found that denominational patterns did not vary by either of these variables.

4. Based on the recommendation of Steensland et al. (2000), members who listed no denomination or were members of nondenominational Protestant churches were coded as “other conservative Protestant” if they attended church on a regular basis and were considered nonaffiliated otherwise.

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