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# **Attitudes Toward Marriage, Divorce, Cohabitation, and Casual Sex Among Working-Age Latinos: Does Religion Matter?**

**Christopher G. Ellison   Nicholas H. Wolfinger  
and Aida I. Ramos-Wada**

## **Abstract**

The rapid growth of the Latino population in the United States has renewed interest in Latino family research. It has often been assumed that Catholicism is a key factor influencing Latinos' attitudes toward the family, despite the fact that nearly one third of Latinos are not Catholic. This article uses data from the 2006 National Survey of Religion and Family Life, a survey of working-age adults (aged 18-59 years) in the lower 48 states, to explore the relationship between multiple dimensions of religiosity—denomination, church attendance, prayer, and beliefs about the Bible—and Latinos' attitudes regarding marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and casual sex. Compared with Catholics, evangelical Protestants tend to hold more conservative attitudes on family-related issues. Latinos who attend services regularly and pray frequently also report more traditional views. Findings involving literalist views of the Bible are more equivocal. Taken together, religious variables

are just as potent as socioeconomic and demographic factors in explaining individual-level variation in Latinos' attitudes. Study limitations are noted, and several directions for future research are identified.

## **Keywords**

religion, Latinos, attitudes, marriage, divorce

## **Introduction**

In recent years, a growing body of research has examined the family patterns of Latinos in the United States. Much of this interest may be driven by demographic trends: Latinos have now surpassed African Americans as the largest ethnic minority population in America (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2011). Scholarship on Latino family life has long emphasized the role of distinctive cultural values, particularly “familism” and “machismo,” in shaping family behaviors (Baca Zinn & Pok, 2002; Grebler, Moore, & Guzman, 1970; Vega, 1990; Williams, 1990). More recently investigators have tended to focus on the role of structural factors, such as assimilation and socioeconomic attainment, in shaping Latino families (e.g., Landale & Oropesa, 2007; Raley, Durden, & Wildsmith, 2004). For the most part, these studies compare Latinos with non-Hispanic Whites and African Americans. Their findings point to long-term convergence between some Latino subgroups, notably Mexican Americans, and non-Hispanic Whites, on outcomes such as marriage and divorce rates (Bean, Berg, & Van Hook, 1996; Landale & Oropesa, 2007; Oropesa & Landale, 2004; Raley et al., 2004).

Our study complements this literature but differs in several ways. We explore attitudes toward marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and casual sex among working-age Latinos. Instead of comparing Latinos with African Americans and non-Hispanic Whites, we seek to identify sources of intra-Latino variation in attitudes. Most important, we focus on a largely overlooked cultural factor in shaping Latino attitudes: religion. This neglect of potential religious influences is important for at least two reasons. First, although reliable data have been elusive, levels of religious affiliation and devotion are believed to be relatively high among Latinos (e.g., Diaz-Stevens & Stevens-Arroyo, 1998), and researchers have long assumed that Latino Catholicism has been inextricably linked to familism, machismo, and other distinctive family beliefs and practices within the Latino population. In addition, adherence to Protestantism—primarily its evangelical and charismatic variants—has been on the rise among U.S. Latinos (Greeley, 1994; Hunt, 1999)

and, indeed, throughout much of Latin America and the Caribbean (Steigenga & Cleary, 2007). Studies reveal that Latino evangelicals are typically more observant and devout than their Catholic counterparts and that they hold highly conservative views on family-related public policy issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage (Ellison, Acevedo, & Ramos-Wada, 2011; Ellison, Echevarria, & Smith, 2005). Taken together, these findings raise intriguing questions about the role of religious factors in shaping family-related attitudes and values among Latinos.

The remainder of our article is organized as follows. We begin by reviewing recent trends in Latino family demography, focusing on marriage, cohabitation, and childbearing. Next, we discuss emergent research on religion among Latinos, with particular attention to the growth of Protestantism. We then test a series of hypotheses regarding religious differentials in attitudes regarding marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and casual sex using data from an oversample of Latinos ( $n = 801$ ) from the National Survey of Religion and Family Life (NSRFL), a national telephone survey of working-age U.S. adults. The results confirm the existence of major religious differentials in family-related attitudes. Evangelical Protestants tend to hold more traditional attitudes than their Catholic counterparts, often presumed to be the standard-bearers of Latino cultural conservatism. In addition, Latinos who attend services regularly and engage in frequent private prayer, as well as those who believe the Bible is the literal Word of God, tend to hold more traditional views. Study limitations, implications, and directions for future research are identified.

## **Background**

*Research on Latino marriage and cohabitation patterns.* A growing body of demographic research has assessed the distinctive family patterns of Latinos in the United States (Landale & Oropesa, 2007; Oropesa & Landale, 2004; Vega, 1990). Much of the existing work has compared Latinos with other racial-ethnic subgroups, primarily African Americans and non-Hispanic Whites, with much less attention to intragroup variations in family-related attitudes and behaviors. Several studies report that Latinos embrace comparatively strong pronuptial norms, tending to view marriage as far more desirable than being single. Marriage is seen as a lifetime commitment, more important than the autonomy of individual spouses (Flores, Tschann, Marin, & Pantoja, 2004; Oropesa, 1996; Oropesa & Gorman, 2000). Unmarried Latinos, especially women, tend to hold stronger marital aspirations than their counterparts from other racial-ethnic backgrounds (East, 1998). On

closer inspection, these pronuptial patterns tend to characterize Mexican Americans—and to the extent that data permit reliable inference, Cuban Americans—more than Puerto Ricans. Such norms are also reflected in Latinos' actual behavior. Mexican Americans are more likely to marry than other racial-ethnic minorities and as likely to marry as non-Hispanic Whites, despite Latinos' relatively low average socioeconomic status (SES) that might otherwise be expected to depress marriage rates (Landale & Oropesa, 2007; Oropesa, Lichter, & Anderson, 1994). In addition, marital stability has traditionally been higher among Latinos than other racial-ethnic populations with similar socioeconomic standing (Bean et al., 1996; Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Fu & Wolfinger, 2011).

Yet the focus on marriage does not necessarily rule out tolerance of cohabitation. Rates of cohabitation for Puerto Ricans are approximately high as those of African Americans, whereas Mexican Americans and non-Hispanic Whites cohabit at similar rates (Landale & Oropesa, 2007; Smock, 2000). Indeed, Mexican Americans are not necessarily opposed to cohabitation, especially if it eventually leads to marriage. For Latinos in general, several patterns are clear. First, rates of childbearing in cohabiting couples are higher than in other population groups. Roughly 25% of all Latino children are born to cohabiting couples (Landale & Oropesa, 2007). Second, these births are more likely to be planned than are births to cohabiting couples from other racial-ethnic backgrounds (Manning, 2001; Musick, 2002). Third, Latino cohabiting relationships involving children are less likely to dissolve than are comparable unions from other racial-ethnic backgrounds (Manning, 2004; Wildsmith & Raley, 2006).

Although some research acknowledges that Latino cultural values may influence demographic characteristics (e.g., East, 1998; Manning, 2001; Oropesa & Gorman, 2000), a prominent theme of recent research on Latino marriage and family has been the *de-emphasis* of cultural factors (e.g., familism, machismo) as explanations for Latino family trends (Landale & Oropesa, 2007; Oropesa & Landale, 2004). Instead, researchers have drawn attention to the role of structural factors—SES, nativity and generation, assimilation—in explaining differences between Latinos and others and in moderating observed patterns of Latino family distinctiveness. For example, Bean et al. (1996) report that apparent Mexican American advantages in marital stability—to the extent they exist at all—are confined to the first generation, and diminish with greater exposure to American culture. Similarly, Puerto Ricans with the least exposure to the United States divorce less (Landale & Ogena, 1995). In addition, the U.S.-born Mexican American population has lower marriage rates than non-Hispanic Whites once family

background characteristics associated with early marriage are controlled, and the two groups are equally likely to marry in response to a pregnancy (Raley et al., 2004). These and other studies reveal that group-level differences are contingent on nativity, generation, and SES factors, particularly education (Landale & Oropesa, 2007; Wildsmith & Raley, 2006). More generally, investigators have concluded that both structural and cultural factors shape Latino family patterns.

*The role of religion.* Although some cultural factors, notably machismo and familism, have been widely discussed in the literature on Latino family life, the role of religion as a potential source of intragroup variation within this population has been woefully neglected. However, interest in the religion–family connection is presently enjoying a resurgence (Mahoney, 2010; Wilcox, 2005). A particularly rich body of recent work links aspects of religion and spirituality with marital processes and outcomes (Waite & Lehrer, 2003). For example, recent studies have linked religious affiliation and practice with marital expectations (Ellison, Burdette, & Glenn, 2011) and entry into marriage (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007; Xu, Hudspeth, & Bartkowski, 2005). In addition, studies have linked multiple dimensions of religiosity to relationship commitment and quality (Ellison, Burdette, & Wilcox, 2010; Myers, 2006; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008; Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008). Furthermore, religious involvement is inversely associated with relationship conflict, including the risk of domestic violence, as well as marital infidelity (Burdette, Ellison, Sherkat, & Gore, 2007; Ellison, Bartkowski, & Anderson, 1999). Another recent study associates religious affiliation, practice, and belief with attitudes toward divorce laws in the United States (Stokes & Ellison, 2010), and a long tradition of work links religious factors with marital stability (Call & Heaton, 1997; Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993; Vaaler, Ellison, & Powers, 2009). Taken together, this body of research suggest that members of conservative (i.e., evangelical and fundamentalist) Protestant and sectarian religious groups, those who participate in organizational and nonorganizational religious practices, and those who endorse conservative theological beliefs hold especially traditional attitudes on a range of family-related issues.

Despite the mounting interest in this topic, research linking religion with marriage and family among Latinos remains nascent. To be sure, several studies have focused on religion and marital issues among “fragile families,” that is, low-SES, urban, predominantly race-ethnic minority couples (Lichter & Carmalt, 2009; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007, 2008, forthcoming; Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008). However, only a handful of studies directly explore race-ethnic variation in the links between religion and marital processes (e.g., Brown,

Orbuch, & Bauermeister, 2008; Ellison et al., 2010). To date, we are aware of only one study that focuses squarely on the role of religion among Latinos (Wolfinger, Wilcox, & Hernandez, 2010). This study finds that church attendance generally promotes positive assessments of union quality, although married Latinos appear to benefit more from religion than do Latinos in non-marital intimate relationships.

Among U.S. Latinos, Catholicism has traditionally been the dominant faith tradition. Currently an estimated 70% or more of U.S. Latinos identify as Catholics (Espinosa, Elizondo, & Miranda, 2005; Perl, Greely, & Gray, 2006), and many researchers argue that Catholicism has long exerted a wide influence over Latino culture and family life (e.g., Diaz-Stevens, 1994; Grebler et al., 1970; Williams, 1990). Indeed, Espin (1994) goes so far as to assert that “popular Catholicism is the key matrix of all Hispanic cultures” and that “the study of this religion is crucial for an understanding of all Hispanic peoples” (p. 313). Catholicism embraces distinctive teachings regarding family life. In particular, Catholic doctrine holds marriage to be a Holy Sacrament. Catholic tradition also strongly discourages divorce among the faithful, and divorced persons are precluded from remarrying within the Church, although in recent years, the Catholic Church has dealt with historically high divorce rates by expanding access to annulments (Wilde, 2001).

In her detailed ethnographic study of Mexican American family life, Williams (1990) observed a strong linkage between family patterns, life cycle rituals, and Catholic religion. With regard to marriage, Williams concluded the following:

It was taken for granted that all men and women would marry and have children, and many did so in their teens. This was reinforced by the beliefs of the Catholic Church, where marriage and childbearing are considered to be part of God’s plan for human beings. Marriage was vital, for homemaking and the bearing and rearing of children were considered the ultimate fulfillment of a woman’s life in this world. (p. 27)

Williams (1990) further elaborated on the distinctive Mexican American wedding ceremony:

*Arras* are thirteen coins that were blessed by the priest during the ceremony. They symbolized the fact that the husband would be the provider (though there are other interpretations, such as that the *Arras* would bring the bride and groom good luck during the marriage or serve as an assurance that the couple would never be without money).

The *Lazo*, a rosary placed around the bride and groom at a certain point during the ceremony, symbolized the marital bond or the union of the two persons into one. The wedding cushions were used by the bride and groom to kneel on while they received communion during the wedding ceremony. The cushions and the rosary served to reinforce the deeply religious significance of the wedding bond. (p. 31)

Despite the possible waning of such traditions, the long-standing connection between Catholic religion and marriage suggests that contemporary Latino Catholics—especially observant Catholics, that is, those who attend services regularly—may hold relatively conservative views about marriage, casual sex, cohabitation, and divorce.

Although Catholicism remains the dominant religious tradition among Latinos, recent years have witnessed the significant expansion of Protestantism throughout Latin America (e.g., Steigenga & Cleary, 2007), and among U.S. Latinos (Diaz-Stevens & Stevens-Arroyo, 1998; Greeley, 1994). The most reliable sources now estimate that 20% to 25% of U.S. Latinos are Protestant (Espinosa et al., 2005; Perl et al., 2006), and with few exceptions (e.g., Hunt, 1999), researchers have concluded that the vast majority of Protestant growth is accruing to evangelical and charismatic groups rather than mainline—moderate or liberal—variants of Protestantism (Greeley, 1994). This is an important development for a number of reasons. Compared with other Latinos, evangelical Protestants tend to hold extremely conservative views on family-related policy matters, such as abortion rights (Ellison et al., 2005) and same-sex marriage (Ellison, Acevedo, et al., 2011). They are also more likely to back political candidates who endorse these views (Lee & Pachon, 2007). These patterns could imply similarly conservative beliefs regarding marriage, divorce, cohabitation, casual sex, and related issues, although to date these issues have not been carefully investigated.

Many evangelical Protestants hold strong convictions about marriage and other family matters. Such attitudes are thought to be rooted in a core tenet of evangelical theology: the view that the Bible is the Word of God and that it is without error and contains necessary and sufficient information to guide most human affairs, especially those involving faith and family (Hempel & Bartkowski, 2008). Many evangelicals contend that the Bible—or at least significant portions of it—should be interpreted literally. However, it should be kept in mind that specific scriptural interpretations are not simply the product of individual readings of religious texts. Rather, these are often generated via interpretive communities, or networks of theologians, scholars, and pastors, and subsequently spread among rank-and-file laypersons



(Boone, 1989; Malley, 2004). Because the Bible is complex and multivocal, interpretive communities both select and (re)construct meanings about key issues, emphasizing some themes and passages (e.g., those dealing with nuclear family arrangements, sexuality, etc.) while downplaying others (e.g., those dealing with social justice and economic equity).

With regard to marriage and divorce, evangelical leaders and communities typically emphasize Jesus' famous statement, included in many religious wedding ceremonies: "Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate" (Matthew 19:6, New International Version). On the basis of such teachings, many evangelicals conclude that divorce is a sin and only permissible if a spouse is unfaithful, via adultery or abuse (Stokes & Ellison, 2010). Furthermore, some evangelical churches do not allow divorced or remarried congregants to hold key leadership posts (Adams, 1986). Evangelical elites have led the way in advocating public policies that promote marriage and marital stability, sometimes endorsing more restrictive laws on divorce (Stokes & Ellison, 2010) and advocating for the option of "covenant" marriage in a number of states (Nock, Sanchez, & Wright, 2008). Although evangelical Protestants hold a range of views concerning sexuality and fertility (e.g., Regnerus, 2007), a significant segment of the evangelical community views marriage as the only honorable context for sexual activity. Indeed, for some religious conservatives, the most important purpose—indeed, perhaps the only purpose—of sexual activity is procreation (e.g., Ellison & Goodson, 1997). Taken together, these arguments suggest that evangelical Protestants, and especially those who attend services regularly, will tend to hold conservative views of marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and casual sex.

In addition to possible denominational and theological differences in views of marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and sexual behavior, it is also important to explore the role of religious involvement and commitment in shaping family-related attitudes. Several studies over the years have associated frequent religious attendance with more traditional values in these domains (Hertel & Hughes, 1987; Stokes & Ellison, 2010; Thornton, Axinn, & Hill, 1992; Wilson & Musick, 1996). Such patterns may reflect the fact that regular attendees are exposed to formal statements about religious doctrine (e.g., sermons, religious education classes) as well as reinforcement through informal interaction with fellow churchgoers. Attendance may also be a barometer of religious commitment. Furthermore, it may be useful to consider the role of private devotional pursuits, such as prayer, in bolstering family-related norms and values. Persons who pray often construct an ongoing dialogue with a perceived divine other, much as they develop and

intensify relationships with social others (e.g., Pollner, 1989; Sharp, 2010). This divine other is available as needed for guidance and solace. Such divine relations may strengthen religious worldviews and deepen religious convictions on a host of matters, including beliefs about marriage and family-related issues. There are sound reasons to anticipate that the private devotional activities may be important among Latinos, perhaps even more so than participation in organized religion. This is the case because of the long-standing marginalization of Latinos by the official Catholic Church (e.g., Fernandez, 2007) and the rich tradition of popular spirituality within the Latino population (e.g., Diaz-Stevens & Stevens-Arroyo, 1998; Pena & Frehill, 1998).

It is important to note that cohabitation is a complex issue for Latinos. On one hand, Catholic and perhaps, especially, evangelical religious cultures tend to oppose sex outside of marriage. In the general population, religiousness reduces the odds of cohabitation and the experience of cohabitation reduces subsequent religious involvement (Thornton et al., 1992). On the other hand, as noted earlier, approval or at least tolerance of cohabitation appears to be widespread among most Latinos, and this is particularly the case if the cohabiting unions are stable and involve childbearing (Manning, 2001, 2004). The issue of cohabitation is further complicated by the fact that many Latin American societies have long-standing traditions of consensual unions, which function very much like cohabiting unions in the United States (Lanale & Oropesa, 2007; Martin, 2002). For these reasons, the link between religion and attitudes toward cohabitation may be less straightforward among Latinos than among non-Hispanic Whites in the United States.

### *The Present Study*

Given the foregoing discussion, we examine the associations between several specific dimensions of religion and Latinos' attitudes toward marriage and divorce, cohabitation, and casual sexual activity. First, a key area of exploration is potential denominational variation. On one hand, both Catholicism and evangelical Protestantism embrace traditional orientations on many of these family-related matters. Indeed, Catholicism has often been depicted as the standard-bearer of cultural traditionalism among Latinos. On the other hand, in studies of the general U.S. population, evangelical Protestants hold much more conservative views than their counterparts from other faith backgrounds, including Catholics. This suggests that evangelical Protestants will embrace especially conservative attitudes on marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and casual sex. Indeed, among Latinos evangelical

Protestants tend to express more conservative policy preferences on family-related issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage, even compared with their Catholic counterparts (Ellison, Acevedo, et al., 2011; Ellison et al., 2005).

Second, we investigate the link between the belief in biblical literalism—an important element in evangelical doctrine—and these family-related attitudes. In studies of the general adult population, literalists express much more conservative views than nonliteralists. Third, we examine the associations between two types of religious practice—organizational, measured in terms of attendance at services, and nonorganizational, as measured by private prayer—and attitudes regarding marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and casual sex. These facets of religious practice may serve as indicators of commitment, and they may also suggest mechanisms via which religious worldviews are strengthened. Finally, we consider the possibility that any denominational differences may be most evident among those persons who are the most committed adherents, for example, those who attend services regularly or those who pray frequently. Such a possibility implies statistical interaction(s) between denominational affiliation and religious practice(s). Previous studies of Latinos' public policy preferences have revealed evidence of such conditional relationships (Ellison, Acevedo, et al., 2011; Ellison et al., 2005).

## **Method**

### *Data*

We use data from the NSRFL, a 2006 telephone survey of working-age adults (aged 18-59 years) in the contiguous United States. The NSRFL contains extensive data on religious affiliation, beliefs, and practices, as well as on attitudes toward marriage, divorce, and cohabitation. Households were selected to participate in the survey using random-digit dialing (RDD), with one respondent randomly chosen to participate from each household. African Americans and Latinos were oversampled by dialing into area codes containing at least 10% concentrations of those racial and ethnic subgroups. The overall response rate for the NSRFL was 36%. Although this figure is low by traditional standards, it compares favorably with most recent national surveys based on RDD (Council on Market and Opinion Research, 2003), and it is consistent with the response rates of other telephone surveys on which social science studies have been based (e.g., Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006; Ellison et al., 2010). More important, research shows few differences between government surveys with high response rates (e.g., the

Current Population Survey) and RDD-based surveys with lower response rates (Keeter, Miller, Kohut, Groves, & Presser, 2000; Pew Research Center for People and the Press, 2004). On average, the survey took 30 minutes to complete. Interviews were conducted in English or Spanish, a notable strength of the NSRFL.

Because of the oversampling, the NSRFL contains roughly equal numbers of African American, Hispanic, and non-Hispanic White respondents. We analyze only the Hispanics ( $n = 801$ ). Missing data are addressed via multiple imputation (e.g., Allison, 2001).

## Variables

We use four dependent variables that tap various attitudes toward marriage and cohabitation. These variables measure respondent agreement with the following statements:

- “Casual sex is OK.”
- “When married people realize that they no longer love each other, they should get a divorce.”
- “Marriage is an unbreakable vow before God.”
- “Living together outside of marriage is morally wrong.”

Agreement with each of these statements was scored with a 5-point scale: *strongly agree* (1), *somewhat agree* (2), *neither agree nor disagree* (3), *somewhat disagree* (4), *strongly disagree* (5). We reversed the coding on the latter two dependent variables so that higher scores indicate more socially conservative responses.

Religion is measured with four variables. Our primary independent variable is a nominal measure of denomination: evangelical Protestant (Steensland et al., 2000), Catholic, other affiliations (merged into one category), and unaffiliated. Catholics are the comparison group, given the received wisdom that Catholics are the core culturally conservative constituency among Latinos. Because only 36 respondents fall into the heterogeneous “other affiliations” category (20 mainline Protestants and 16 who report their denominational affiliation as Jewish, Mormon, Orthodox, Muslim, or miscellaneous non-Christian), more fine-grained analyses of these groups cannot be conducted. Second, a dummy variable measures whether respondents attend religious services several times a month or more often. Past research suggests that this is the most effective coding of religious attendance (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007, 2008; Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008). Third, a dummy

variable measures whether respondents report praying on a daily basis. Fourth, an ordinal variable measures biblical literalism. Respondents were asked about their agreement with the following statement: “The Bible is the literal Word of God and a true guide to faith and morality.” Response categories are *strongly agree*, *somewhat agree*, *neither agree nor disagree*, *somewhat disagree*, or *strongly disagree*. Recoding this item as a dichotomy yields similar results.

We use a variety of social, demographic, and economic measures to assess the relative contribution of religiosity, as well as to account for spuriousness in the relationship between religiosity and attitudes toward marriage, divorce, and cohabitation. Three items tap potential cultural differences between respondents. These include dummy variables measuring whether respondents completed the NSRFL interview in English or Spanish, are U.S. citizens, and are of Mexican descent. Sample size considerations preclude further differentiation of national background. Three items explore respondents’ demographic attributes. These include age, a continuous variable, and dummy variables for sex and whether respondents are parents. Current relationship status has four categories: married (the reference category), cohabiting, formerly married, and never married. Finally, two sets of dummy variables tap SES, measured using education and income. Education has four categories: not a high school graduate (the reference category), high school graduate, some college, and college graduate. Income has four categories: less than \$25,000 (the reference category), \$25,000 to \$49,999, \$50,000 to \$85,000, and more than \$85,000.

## **Analysis**

Two ordered logistic regression models are estimated for each of our four dependent variables. We begin with a baseline model that includes only independent variables measuring religion: church attendance, prayer, denomination, and biblical literalism. Next, we add all other independent variables: citizenship, language of interview, national origins, employment status, sex, parenthood, marital status, education, and income.

## **Results**

### ***Descriptive Statistics***

Descriptive statistics appear in Table 1. For all four dependent variable—attitudes toward casual sex, whether spouses no longer in love should seek

**Table 1.** Means, Percentages, and Significance Tests Between Catholics and Evangelicals, Others, and Respondents With No Affiliation

	All	Catholic	Evangelical	Other	No Affiliation
Dependent variables					
Casual sex is OK	3.25 (765)	3.18 (483)	3.59 (147)	3.46 (35)	2.98 (80)
T test (two-tailed)	—	—	2.55*	0.91	-0.99
Loveless couples should not divorce	2.24 (784)	2.03 (489)	2.90 (154)	2.81 (36)	1.80 (84)
T test (two-tailed)	—	—	6.43***	3.14**	-1.41
Marriage is an unbreakable vow before God	4.20 (789)	4.29 (493)	4.44 (154)	3.89 (36)	3.27 (83)
T test (two-tailed)	—	—	1.33	-1.88 <sup>†</sup>	-6.64***
Cohabitation is morally wrong	2.89 (780)	2.82 (488)	3.34 (151)	3.06 (36)	2.32 (82)
T test (two-tailed)	—	—	3.33***	0.82	-2.53*
Attends church regularly	40% (795)	40% (499)	57% (153)	50% (36)	5% (84)
Chi-square test	—	—	13.38***	1.37	39.43***
Prays daily	62% (792)	62% (496)	75% (155)	69% (36)	34% (22)
Chi-square test	—	—	9.87**	0.86	22.77***
Biblical literalist	4.32 (785)	4.38 (494)	4.65 (153)	4.39 (36)	3.37 (79)
T test (two-tailed)	—	—	2.55*	0.03	-6.56***
American citizen	49% (798)	40% (501)	57% (155)	56% (36)	49% (83)
Chi-square test	—	—	14.71***	3.40 <sup>†</sup>	2.64
English interview	52% (801)	47% (501)	62% (156)	75% (36)	50% (84)
Chi-square test	—	—	10.47***	10.76***	0.31
Mexican origin	64% (791)	67% (496)	61% (153)	53% (36)	55% (83)
Chi-square test	—	—	2.23	3.19 <sup>†</sup>	4.48*
Employed	93% (801)	94% (501)	91% (156)	94% (36)	88% (84)
Chi-square test	—	—	1.70	0.01	3.95*
Male	34% (801)	32% (501)	29% (156)	47% (36)	48% (84)
Chi-square test	—	—	0.46	3.66 <sup>†</sup>	8.08**
Parent	69% (798)	70% (499)	72% (156)	64% (36)	64% (84)
Chi-square test	—	—	0.24	0.54	1.00
Age	37.2 (796)	37.6 (497)	36.9 (156)	39.44 (36)	34.6 (83)
T test (two-tailed)	—	—	-0.73	0.98	-2.39*
Marital status					
Cohabiting	10% (80)	10% (52)	8% (13)	9% (3)	13% (11)
Formerly married	15% (118)	15% (73)	16% (25)	11% (4)	17% (14)
Never married	19% (151)	15% (77)	22% (34)	20% (7)	27% (23)
Married	56% (448)	60% (298)	53% (82)	60% (21)	43% (36)
Total	100% (797)	100% (500)	100% (154)	100% (35)	100% (84)
Chi-square test	—	—	4.58	0.78	10.24*

(continued)

**Table 1. (continued)**

	All	Catholic	Evangelical	Other	No Affiliation
<b>Income (US\$)</b>					
<25,000	40% (286)	42% (185)	40% (55)	28% (9)	39% (31)
25,000-50,000	30% (212)	28% (125)	29% (40)	41% (13)	32% (25)
50,000-85,000	17% (122)	18% (81)	18% (25)	6% (2)	14% (11)
>85,000	13% (93)	12% (54)	12% (17)	25% (8)	15% (12)
Total	100% (445)	100% (137)	100% (137)	100% (32)	100% (79)
Chi-square test	—	—	0.10	9.20*	1.58
<b>Education</b>					
Not a high school graduate	27% (216)	30% (150)	24% (37)	14% (5)	23% (19)
High school graduate	32% (250)	31% (155)	35% (45)	25% (9)	32% (26)
Some college	21% (163)	19% (98)	24% (37)	28% (10)	17% (14)
College graduate	21% (165)	20% (98)	17% (27)	33% (12)	28% (23)
Total	100% (795)	100% (498)	100% (155)	100% (36)	100% (82)
Chi-square test	—	—	3.78	7.79†	3.69

Note: Values in parentheses indicate *N*.

†*p* < .10. \**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

divorce, whether marriage is an unbreakable vow before God, and attitudes toward casual sex—evangelical Protestants report higher scores and therefore more conservative attitudes than do Catholics. These differences are statistically significant for all dependent variables except the item measuring whether marriage is an unbreakable vow before God. Respondents of other denominations also hold more conservative beliefs than do Catholics for all dependent variables except the violability of marriage. Predictably, unaffiliated individuals report less conservative attitudes all around than do their affiliated counterparts.

Evangelicals are more religiously active than are Catholics, members of other denominations, or unaffiliated individuals. Fifty-seven percent of evangelicals attend services several times a month or more, compared with 40% of Catholics, 50% of members of other denominations, and 5% of unaffiliated respondents. Seventy-five percent of evangelicals pray daily, compared with 62% of Catholics, 69% of members of other denominations, and a surprisingly high 34% of unaffiliated individuals. Finally, biblical literalism is extremely high for all but the unaffiliated. Ninety-three percent of evangelicals, 87% of Catholics, 86% of members of other faiths, and an again surprising 57% of unaffiliated individuals somewhat or strongly believe that the Bible is the literal Word of God (result not shown).

The other independent variables reveal further differences between evangelicals and other respondents. Evangelicals are more likely to be American citizens and more likely—except for members of other faiths—to have completed the NSRFL interview in English. Catholics are more likely to be of Mexican descent—as opposed to other national origins—than are members of other denominations. There are relatively few differences in employment status, although unaffiliated respondents are a little less likely to be employed. Evangelicals are more likely to be women and more likely to have children than are members of other faiths. On the other hand, evangelicals are less likely to be either married or cohabiting than are Catholics. There are relatively few denominational differences in income or education, although members of non-Catholic/nonevangelical denominations tend to score better on both counts. Finally, there are relatively modest denominational differences in age, although unaffiliated individuals tend to be a bit younger whereas members of other denominations are a little older than Catholics or evangelicals.

### *Multivariate Results*

Table 2 presents a series of ordered logistic regression models that estimate the net effects of religious variables and covariates on attitudes regarding marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and casual sex. For each outcome, we display two models: (a) a zero-order model including only religious predictors and (b) a model that adds a broad array of sociodemographic control variables. This design is ideally suited to address the central question posed by our study: Does religion make a difference, over and above the effects of other respondent attributes, in shaping Latino attitudes? Our discussion below centers primarily on the adjusted (full) model for each outcome.

Models 1 and 2 in Table 2 estimate the net effects of religious and other variables on agreement that “marriage is an unbreakable vow before God.” Several findings are especially noteworthy. First, there are no meaningful differences between Catholics and evangelical Protestants in support for this item. However, Latinos with no religious ties are much less supportive than their Catholic counterparts, even when variations in religious attendance, prayer, and beliefs about the Bible are held constant (odds ratio [OR] = 0.50,  $p < .01$ ). Despite the absence of a Catholic–evangelical gap in agreement with this item, Latinos who agree that the Bible is the literal Word of God—which is often an indicator of adherence to evangelical Protestant doctrine—are more inclined to view marriage as an unbreakable vow before God (OR = 1.37,  $p < .001$ ). In addition, people who pray frequently (OR = 1.75,  $p < .01$ ) are



**Table 2.** Ordered Logit Odds Ratios for Effects of Religious Variables and Covariates on Latino Attitudes Toward Marriage, Divorce, Cohabitation, and Casual Sex

	Marriage		Divorce		Cohabitation		Casual Sex	
	Unbreakable Vow							
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8
Denomination								
Evangelical	1.06	1.19	2.73***	2.47***	1.50*	1.77**	1.40 <sup>†</sup>	1.52*
Other	0.53	0.67	2.50**	1.83 <sup>†</sup>	1.16	1.34	1.31	1.24
No affiliation	0.52**	0.50**	0.59*	0.65	1.04	1.03	1.02	1.16
Catholic	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Attends church regularly	1.18	1.33	1.72***	1.70***	1.49**	1.56**	1.55**	1.21
Biblical literalist	1.53***	1.37***	0.74***	0.83**	1.47***	1.35***	0.96	1.05
Prays daily	1.65**	1.75***	1.20	1.21	1.47**	1.46*	1.61***	1.27
American citizen		1.18		1.07		1.04		0.73 <sup>†</sup>
English interview		0.50**		2.39***		0.61*		1.30
Mexican origin		1.08		0.98		1.05		0.81
Employed		0.86		0.77		0.91		0.61 <sup>†</sup>
Male		1.05		1.04		1.48**		0.44***
Parent		0.97		1.01		1.33 <sup>†</sup>		1.19
Age		1.00		0.99		1.00		1.04***
Marital status								
Cohabiting		1.01		0.37***		0.52**		1.01
Formerly married		1.31		0.70		1.19		0.76
Never married		0.88		0.67 <sup>†</sup>		0.87		0.68 <sup>†</sup>
Married		—		—		—		—
Income (US\$)								
<25,000		—		—		—		—
25,000-50,000		0.93		1.47 <sup>†</sup>		1.24		1.12
50,000-85,000		0.97		1.14		1.03		1.24
>85,000		0.86		1.09		1.02		1.00
Education								
Not a high school graduate		—		—		—		—
High school graduate		0.75		0.81		0.67*		1.42 <sup>†</sup>
Some college		0.87		1.74*		0.71		1.98**
College graduate		0.56*		1.16		0.65 <sup>†</sup>		1.84*
F	18.24***	6.02***	13.29***	6.63***	14.28***	5.49***	5.36***	5.43***
N	789	787	784	781	780	777	765	762

† $p < .10$ . \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

much more supportive of this perspective on marriage than their counterparts who are less religiously active. Only a few sociodemographic factors predict individual-level variation in agreement with this item. Specifically, support for this view is markedly lower among respondents who completed the interview in English rather than Spanish and among those Latinos who are college graduates.

Models 3 and 4 estimate the net effects of religious and sociodemographic factors on (dis)agreement that divorce is a desirable resolution for married couples who no longer love one another. In contrast to the results in Models 1 and 2, we find much stronger antipathy toward divorce among evangelical Protestants than among Catholics ( $OR = 2.47, p < .001$ ). Persons with no religious ties are somewhat more accepting of divorce in the case of a loveless marriage, although the effect is not statistically significant in the full model. Regular churchgoers are more opposed to divorce than their less active counterparts ( $OR = 1.70, p < .001$ ), although we find no association between frequency of prayer and approval of divorce. These models also reveal one counterintuitive pattern: Latinos who believe strongly in biblical literalism are significantly more accepting of divorce when partners fall out of love ( $OR = 0.83, p < .01$ ). We revisit this intriguing finding in the Discussion section of the article. Attitudes regarding the acceptability of divorce also vary by a number of sociodemographic factors. Respondents who were interviewed in English are less accepting of divorce than those who completed their interviews in Spanish. Perhaps not surprisingly, those who were cohabiting or never married are more supportive of marital dissolution than their currently married counterparts. Finally, we observe only modest and inconsistent variations by SES: Respondents with some college (but less than a BA/BS degree), as well as those persons with relatively low household incomes, hold somewhat less lenient views on divorce than others.

Models 5 and 6 present estimates of the net effects of religious and secular variables on views regarding the (im)morality of cohabitation. Evangelical Protestants are much more prone to condemn this practice than Catholics ( $OR = 1.77, p < .01$ ). In addition, people who embrace biblical literalism are much less approving of cohabitation ( $OR = 1.35, p < .001$ ). Moreover, both regular religious attendance ( $OR = 1.56, p < .01$ ) and frequent prayer ( $OR = 1.46, p < .05$ ) predict more conservative views of cohabitation. With regard to secular predictors, we not surprisingly find that persons in cohabiting relationships tend to hold more liberal views, as do Latinas and respondents who were interviewed in English. Latinos with less than a high school degree hold particularly unfavorable views of cohabitation compared with their better educated counterparts.

Models 7 and 8 display the results of analyses predicting individual-level variation in the acceptability of casual sexual activity. In these models, religious factors play a much more modest role than in models of the other attitudinal outcomes. Compared with Catholics, evangelical Protestants hold more conservative views on this issue (OR = 1.52,  $p < .05$ ). In addition, in the zero-order model (Model 7), Latinos who attend services regularly (OR = 1.55,  $p < .01$ ) and those who pray frequently (OR = 1.61,  $p < .001$ ) appear especially prone to disapprove of casual sex. However, these latter patterns disappear with the inclusion of sociodemographic variables in Model 8. Therefore, we conclude that attitudes on this issue are driven primarily by social location and demographic characteristics, rather than religious beliefs or practices. Among the key secular predictors are gender and age. Approval of casual sex is much higher among men than women and among younger Latinos than among their older persons. All respondents with at least some formal education tend to hold more conservative views than their counterparts who did not graduate from high school. Finally, there are marginally significant ( $p < .10$ ) trends indicating that U.S. citizens, employed persons, and respondents who have never been married are more accepting of casual sexual activity than other Latinos.

### *Ancillary Analyses*

To this point, we have considered only the additive effects of religious affiliation, attendance and prayer, and Bible beliefs on family-related attitudes. However, it is possible that the associations between denomination and attitudes may be conditional on the degree of participation, devotion, or belief. This is a particularly important issue with respect to differences between Catholics and evangelical Protestants. Two possibilities occur to us: (a) the relatively conservative moral values we observe among evangelical Protestants in Table 2 (i.e., the contrast between evangelicals and Catholics, who constitute the reference group, or omitted category in Table 2) could be especially potent among those persons who attend services regularly, those who pray frequently, or those who embrace biblical literalist views; (b) the gap between regular church attendees (and perhaps those who pray frequently) and other Latinos could be particularly acute among Catholics, because many Latinos may self-identity as Catholic for cultural reasons. These persons may have little or no allegiance to, or contact with, institutional Catholicism, and therefore the teachings of the Catholic Church may not influence their moral values on family-related matters. Any of the foregoing arguments would imply the existence of statistically significant interactions

between denomination and other religious variables, which can be examined by adding cross-product terms to the full models for each outcome in Table 2. In ancillary analyses (not shown but available on request) we computed these interactions. No contingent relationships were observed.<sup>1</sup>

## Discussion

Motivated partly by the dynamic growth of the Latino population in the United States, a growing body of research investigates Latino marital and family life. Much of this work emphasizes the influence of cultural and economic incorporation (e.g., generation and nativity status, acculturation, education) on Latino family attitudes and practices (Bean et al., 1996; Landale & Oropesa, 2007; Oropesa & Landale, 2004; Raley et al., 2004). Our work adds to this body of literature by exploring religious variations in attitudes toward marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and nonmarital sexuality among U.S. Latinos. Specifically, this study has examined the roles of several dimensions of religious involvement: (a) denominational affiliation, focusing on Catholic-evangelical Protestant differences; (b) Bible beliefs (i.e., the conviction that the Bible is the literal Word of God); (c) organizational participation (i.e., regular vs. nonregular church attendance); and (d) private religious devotion (i.e., frequent vs. infrequent private prayer). These relationships have been assessed using data from a nationwide sample of working-age (18-59 years) Latino adults drawn in 2006-2007.

Several findings warrant discussion. First, we find that evangelicals are substantially more conservative than Catholics on three of the four attitudinal outcomes examined here: opposition to divorce, cohabitation, and casual sex. There are no Catholic-evangelical differences in normative support for the sanctity of marriage, an orientation that is common among Latinos in general (Flores et al., 2004; Oropesa & Gorman, 2000) Latinos with no religious affiliation express less support for this view of marriage than their religiously affiliated counterparts. The relatively conservative values of evangelical Protestants are especially noteworthy given the long-standing belief that Latino Catholicism is the standard-bearer of traditional family values among this population (Diaz-Stevens, 1994; Grebler et al., 1970; Williams, 1990). In contrast, Latinos who report no religious affiliation tend to embrace more liberal views regarding the violability of marriage and, to a lesser extent, the acceptability of divorce.

Second, in addition to the denominational differences observed here, we find that biblical literalism is linked with three of the four attitudinal outcomes. This is consistent with findings based on the general U.S. population;

specifically, biblical literalists are disproportionately opposed to divorce (Stokes & Ellison, 2010). Somewhat surprisingly, our results show no association between literalism and attitudes toward casual sex. Moreover, there is a curious inconsistency in literalists' views concerning marriage and divorce: Although they are more inclined to believe that marriage is an "unbreakable vow before God," they are comparatively tolerant of divorce for loveless spouses.

How might we interpret these inconsistent findings? In the general U.S. population, biblical literalism often serves as a better marker of evangelicalism than denominational affiliation because of a series of internal and environmental dynamics that have increased the internal heterogeneity of many predominantly European American Protestant bodies (Gay, Ellison, & Powers, 1996; Wuthnow, 1988). Indeed, beliefs about the Bible are often more predictive of variations in family attitudes and practices than other religious variables, such as affiliation or practice (e.g., Bartkowski & Ellison, 2009; Stokes & Ellison, 2010). In contrast, among Latinos, literalism—especially given the wording of the specific item used in this study ("... a true guide for faith and morality")—may measure religious belief and commitment more broadly rather than tapping into a specific evangelical doctrinal belief system. This interpretation is bolstered by the relatively high overall assent on this item; approximately 85% of Latino respondents agree or strongly agree with this statement. For this reason, we speculate that literalism may not be as useful in studies of religious variations in attitudes concerning family life or public policy preferences among Latinos, as compared with the general U.S. population, or with non-Hispanic Whites in particular. With regard to the puzzling findings involving literalism and views about divorce, this is where qualitative research could be especially helpful. Although investigators have used in-depth interviews and focus groups to explore other facets of Latino/Latina religious practices and experiences (e.g., Pena & Frehill, 1998), to our knowledge no one has yet employed such approaches in studying the role of the Bible in the religious lives of U.S. Latinos. These approaches could be highly valuable in clarifying (a) what (if any) scriptural passages and readings may inform views about marriage and its dissolution and (b) how Latinos may negotiate the tension between religiously influenced family ideals and real-world circumstances.

In addition to the role of religious affiliation and belief, we find that religious attendance and devotion have independent associations with certain family-related attitudes. Regular church attendees are more prone to hold traditional views on three of the four outcomes—divorce, cohabitation, and, to a lesser extent, the sanctity of marriage. There is no net relationship

between religious attendance and attitudes about casual sex. Persons who engage in frequent acts of private prayer tend to embrace conservative views concerning the sanctity of marriage and the immorality of cohabitation; however, prayer has no net association with views on divorce or casual sex. Taken together, these findings suggest that both organizational and nonorganizational religious activities may help shape family-related attitudes. Regular attendance at services may reflect high commitment to the teachings of the faith community and may also bolster traditional values via exposure to sermons and other formal moral messages, as well as informal interactions with fellow churchgoers. Personal devotional activities such as private prayer can also reflect and intensify religious commitment and strengthen religious worldviews. Furthermore, our ancillary analyses turned up no evidence that regular attendance or frequent prayer are more strongly linked with family attitudes for evangelicals than for Catholics; rather, it appears that religious affiliation, belief, and participation and devotion have independent associations with the attitudes examined in this study.

Finally, of the four outcome measures considered here, religious differences are especially pronounced with regard to acceptance of cohabitation. Why might this be the case? As we noted earlier, various types of alternative (i.e., nonmarital) unions have long been practiced in parts of Mexico and throughout Latin America (e.g., Martin, 2002). Some researchers have concluded that Mexican Americans are not necessarily opposed to cohabitation, especially if it eventually leads to marriage (Landale & Oropesa, 2007). Thus, one possibility is that these traditions have gained a degree of acceptance, or at least toleration, among many Catholic Latinos in our sample. This may help explain the particularly wide gap between Catholics and evangelicals on this issue. However, this is an area that clearly warrants further investigation.

Our findings have a number of implications. In particular, additional research is needed on the extent to which the religious variations in family values observed here translate into differences in actual behaviors, such as cohabitation, marriage timing, childbearing patterns, marital stability, and other important outcomes. Although several studies comparing Latinos with other racial-ethnic groups have included statistical controls for religious factors (e.g., Oropesa, 1996; Oropesa & Gorman, 2000), we are aware of no studies that have examined religious affiliation, belief, and participation as sources of individual-level variation in behavior among Latinos. In particular, are evangelical Protestants—whose numbers are thought to be growing—less prone to cohabit and more likely to marry and to remain married than others? In addition, are there religious differences in childbearing and

childrearing among Latinos, as there are among non-Hispanic Whites (e.g., Bartkowski & Ellison, 2009; Bartkowski, Xu, & Levin, 2008)? The answers to such questions could have broad implications for individual, family, and collective well-being among American Latinos.

This study is characterized by several limitations. First, as is often the case, cross-sectional data make it impossible to conclusively establish the causal order among variables of interest. To be sure, some individuals may modify their religious involvement as they rethink their attitudes regarding family matters, perhaps changing their affiliations or practices in ways that reflect their beliefs about family and morality. However, there is a wealth of evidence that socialization into religious values and practices often begins at a relatively early age and that by adolescence and young adulthood religious differences translate into variations in an impressive array of domains, including moral values (e.g., Regnerus, 2007; Smith & Snell, 2009). Thus, although we acknowledge the potential bidirectional nature of the associations reported in this study, it seems likely that religious factors play a significant role in shaping many of the variations observed herein. Second, a larger sample would have been desirable. Although the size of the NSRFL Latino subsample is adequate for the central purpose of our study, it is arguably too small to permit investigation of subgroup variations. Thus, although we have explored some possible interactive or contingent effects of religious factors (e.g., by nativity, national-origin group, and SES), the null findings reported here may be partly influenced by small cell sizes for some subgroups, a problem that tends to result in bigger standard errors. Further research on these issues using larger samples is desirable. Third, like most telephone surveys conducted in recent years (e.g., Edgell et al., 2006), the NSRFL had a relatively low response rate. As survey experts have demonstrated (e.g., Groves, 2006), this does not necessarily result in a biased sample. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that this remains a matter of concern. Fourth, it would also be optimal to have better measures of some constructs used in our study, such as acculturation, generation, and nativity status, which are measured somewhat crudely here. In addition, it would also be helpful to have multiple items with which to measure each of the dependent variables, and it is noteworthy that the item tapping (dis)approval of “casual sex” is worded somewhat imprecisely.

Despite these limitations, we believe that this study contributes to the research literature by demonstrating substantial religious differences in attitudes toward marriage, divorce, cohabitation, and casual sexual activity among a nationwide sample of working-age Latinos in the United States. This line of inquiry is particularly important in light of (a) the growth of the

U.S. Latino population, (b) the mounting interest in Latino family life, and (c) the religious ferment currently underway among U.S. Latinos. Given the results presented here, we believe that investigators might profitably incorporate the role of religious factors into analyses of Latino family behavior in the future. Additional research along these lines sketched will enhance our understanding of the diversity and dynamics of Latino families in the United States.

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1. We conducted an exhaustive investigation of the possibility that estimated religious effects are conditional on gender, education, nativity status, and national-origin group. Overall, only a few interactions were statistically significant, no more than chance alone would have predicted, and they yielded no clear or consistent pattern about contingencies in the associations between religious variables and family-related attitudes. In the interest of space, these results are not presented.

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