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Parental Divorce, Parental Religious Characteristics, and Religious Outcomes in Adulthood

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Abstract

Parental divorce has been linked to religious outcomes in adulthood. Previous research has not adequately accounted for parental religious characteristics or subsequent family context, namely whether one's custodial parent remarries. Using pooled data from three waves of the General Social Survey, we examine the relationships among parental divorce, subsequent family structure, and religiosity in adulthood. Growing up in a single-parent family—but not a stepparent family—is positively associated with religious disaffiliation and religious switching and negatively associated with regular religious attendance. Accounting for parental religious characteristics, however, explains sizable proportions of these relationships. Accounting for parental religious affiliation and attendance, growing up with a single parent does not significantly affect religious attendance. Parental religiosity also moderates the relationship between growing up with a single parent and religious attendance: being raised in a single-parent home has a negative effect on religious attendance among adults who had two religiously involved parents.

Keywords

parental divorce; intergenerational transmission; family structure; parental religion; religiosity

Introduction

A large body of evidence now suggests that parental divorce has modest effects on a wide range of child outcomes, and that child wellbeing is highest in households with two married biological parents (see Amato 2005 and Brown 2010 for two recent reviews of this literature). The potential effect of parental divorce on religious outcomes, however, is less clear and has only recently been examined in depth by social scientists. Parental divorce has been linked to institutional religious outcomes—like disaffiliation from a religious tradition and lower frequency of religious service attendance (Lawton and Bures 2001; Zhai et al. 2007)—but the connection to more personal expressions of faith like one's closeness to God, frequency of prayer, or religious salience is less clear. Zhai and colleagues (2007) find no association between parental divorce and personal religious expression, but others have found parental divorce to be predictive of declines in religious salience (Denton 2012; Regnerus and Uecker 2006). Parental divorce may actually increase the likelihood of identifying as “spiritual, but not religious” (Zhai et al. 2008). The effect of divorce may also be contingent on the amount of discord in the parental relationship (Ellison et al. 2011) or the religious profile of the youth when the divorce occurs (Denton 2012). Other studies not

primarily focused on the influence of parental divorce on religious outcomes likewise find that biological two-parent families produce the most religious offspring—at least on some outcomes (Desmond, Morgan, and Kikuchi 2010; Myers 1996; Regnerus and Uecker 2006; Smith and Denton 2005; Uecker, Regnerus, and Vaaler 2007).

Despite making important contributions to our knowledge of the connection between parental divorce and religiosity, these studies have at least three important limitations. First, they do not adequately account for selection into divorce by parents who are religiously heterogeneous or simply less religious. Because these kinds of couples are more likely to divorce (Vaaler, Ellison, and Powers 2009), and because those with religiously heterogeneous or less religious parents are known to be less religious themselves and more prone to religious switching or disaffiliation (Hoge, Petrillo, and Smith 1982; Myers 1996; Nelsen 1990; Regnerus, Smith, and Smith 2004; Sherkat 1991; Smith and Denton 2005), the perceived effect of parental divorce may instead be due to parental religious characteristics. Second, many studies of parental divorce and religiosity do not consider how subsequent family formation (i.e., stepfamilies) may either compensate for or amplify the effects of parental divorce vis-à-vis both intact families and single-parent families. In at least one study, adults from stepfamilies had lower levels of religiosity (Myers 1996); in others, only adolescents and young adults from single-parent homes (or homes with unmarried partners) differed religiously from those from two-parent biological families (Lau and Wolfinger 2011; Petts 2009; Regnerus and Uecker 2006; Smith and Denton 2005). Nevertheless, most of these studies were not designed to answer this specific question and either focus on a narrow set of outcomes or do not include adequate controls for parental religious characteristics. A third limitation of the existing literature is that little attention has been paid to the mechanisms that explain the connection between parental divorce and religious outcomes—if one exists at all (for a notable exception to this, see Zhai et al. 2007).

Identifying the differences in religious outcomes for those who lived in single parent homes versus those who lived in stepparent homes may provide insight into the mechanisms underlying the parental divorce-religion relationship. For example, if an effect of parental divorce is evident both for those who were raised in single parent families and stepfamilies, this would suggest that something about the experience of parental divorce itself affects religiosity, such as anger directed toward God or loss of respect for parents or the parents' religion. If, however, the negative effect is not evident among stepfamilies, this suggests some sort of loss-of-socialization argument: Gaining a stepparent may compensate for losing a biological parent (presuming the stepparent is equally or more religious than the biological parent, which may not always be the case). Differences in the effect of parental divorce by parental religious characteristics may also shed light on the mechanisms behind the parental divorce-religion relationship. For instance, the loss-of-socialization argument may be supported if the negative effect of growing up in a single-parent family is only evident for those who had two religious parents, because there is no religious socialization to be lost through a divorce in situations where one parent is not religious in the first place.

In this study, we use pooled data from the General Social Surveys (GSS) to assess the influence of parental divorce on several religious outcomes. In addition to questions about respondent religiosity and natal family structure at age 16, the 1991, 1998, and 2008 GSS include questions about both paternal and maternal religious affiliation and religious service attendance during the respondent's childhood from which measures of parental religious characteristics can be constructed. These data can be used to more precisely specify the effect of parental divorce on adult religiosity, thereby shedding light on the causal mechanisms that link parental divorce to religious outcomes. It is to further explanation of these mechanisms and the study's theoretical motivation that we now turn.

Explaining the Effect of Parental Divorce on Religious Outcomes

There are numerous explanations for why parental divorce may be associated with lower religiosity among adult offspring. Most directly, parental divorce can be emotionally trying for many children, and those negative emotions may express themselves as anger towards God, leading to disassociation from or diminished involvement in religion (Smith and Denton 2005). The anger or sadness associated with divorce might also be directed at one's parents, who may thus lose moral authority in the minds of their children. Put another way, divorce may disqualify parents as spiritual models or spiritual exemplars. Children of divorced parents also may not be able to reconcile religious teachings that emphasize the sanctity of marriage with their own family experience and may devalue their religion as a means of resolving such cognitive dissonance, a process referred to as sacred loss or desecration (Denton 2012; Ellison et al. 2011; Mahoney et al. 2003).

Lower religiosity among those whose parents have divorced may also be about decreased exposure to a parent who might otherwise be a salient agent of religious socialization. Following divorce, custody arrangements typically limit children's exposure to one of their parents (usually, but not always, their father). This lack of exposure may influence religious socialization in four ways. First, it may lessen the noncustodial parent's role as a spiritual model whose behavior can be imitated and learned by the child. Second, it may interfere with the accumulation of religious or spiritual capital that comes from religious interactions with parents. These two approaches—often called spiritual modeling or spiritual capital—have both garnered empirical support as pathways of religious socialization (Ebstein King, Furrow, and Roth 2002; Ebstein King and Mueller 2004). Third, separation from a parent may erode some parent-child relationships (Amato and Booth 1996), which has been linked to successful intergenerational transmission of religion (Sherkat and Wilson 1995). Fourth, the effect of parental divorce on religiosity may limit religious socialization indirectly through their parents. For example, single parents may find it more logistically difficult to get their children to religious services on a consistent basis (Smith and Denton 2005). Alternatively, single parents may perceive or actually experience stigmatization within religious communities following their divorce, or less dramatically, may simply feel uncomfortable in a setting that is populated by married-parent families and wherein divorce is considered sinful (Edgell 2006; Zhai et al. 2007). This discomfort may lead to diminished participation on the part of single parents, which may filter down to their children. These parents may also experience emotional distress, anger towards God, or sacred loss that diminishes their own religiosity and the religiosity of their children.

Only one study has conducted any empirical tests of some of these mechanisms. Zhai and colleagues (2007) tested to see if differences in young adults' beliefs about their mother's and their father's morality and about the sincerity of their parents' religion mediated the negative relationship they found between parental divorce and religious service attendance. They did not. The authors concluded that there was no evidence that the parental divorce effect was due to parents' disqualification as spiritual models. Zhai and colleagues (2007) also tested whether differences in religious service attendance were mediated by maternal and parental religious socialization. Maternal religious socialization, while positively associated with more frequent church attendance, did not explain the parental divorce effect. However, once the authors included their measure of paternal religious socialization—comprised of responses to items like, "My father encouraged me to practice a religious faith," and "My father taught me how to pray," among others—the negative association between parental divorce and religious service attendance was no longer statistically significant (Zhai et al. 2007). Zhai and colleagues (2007) interpret this as evidence that parental divorce inhibits the accumulation of spiritual capital that comes from religious interaction with one's father. While this may be the case, it may also be the case that these

fathers were less religious in the first place, since divorce is more common among those with no religious affiliation and among religiously heterogeneous couples (Call and Heaton 1997; Vaaler, Ellison, and Powers 2009). The effect may not be about parental divorce at all but rather parental religious characteristics.

Indeed, most of these conceptualizations presume that there is something to be lost from parental divorce. In other words, they implicitly view both parents as religiously committed and active in the religious socialization of the child. They also presume that both parents are of the same religious faith, working together to pass on their shared faith to their children. Mothers, however, are typically expected to carry the bulk of the responsibilities surrounding religious socialization (Glock, Ringer, and Babbie 1967; Walter and Davie 1998). As evidence of this, adolescent and childhood religiosity tends to track more closely with maternal religiosity than with paternal religiosity (Benson, Masters, and Larson 1997; Clark, Worthington, and Danser 1988; Hoge, Petrillo, and Smith 1982; Nelsen 1990; Smith and Denton 2005). Women, we know, are usually more religious than men (Collett and Lizardo 2009; Miller and Stark 2002), and there is a great bit of religious heterogeneity in married couples. For example, in their analysis of the National Survey of Families and Households, Vaaler and colleagues (2009) found that just 56% of married couples (including parents and non-parents) attended religious services at the same rate, with 30% of wives attending more than their husbands. More than one-quarter were mixed-faith couples. Just 30% were theologically aligned, and 42% of wives were more theologically conservative than their husbands. Thus, in at least a significant minority of families, divorce may not have any effect on religious socialization because physical and emotional separation (typically) from one's father may not have religious consequences for those with religiously unaffiliated or inactive fathers. Theoretically, if the divorce effect is a socialization story (and less about divorce itself than subsequent family structure), the effect should only be present for those who come from families with two religious parents.

The Present Study

This study advances our empirical and theoretical understanding of the relationship between parental divorce and adulthood religious outcomes through a number of methodological and analytical improvements. First, we are able to account for the potential spuriousness of the association by including measures of parental religious characteristics. Second, we distinguish between those raised in single-parent families and stepfamilies. Third, we assess the interaction effects of parental divorce and parental religious characteristics (i.e., does parental divorce affect all offspring equally, or is the effect contingent on parental religious characteristics?). Fourth, we are able to assess a wide range of adulthood religious outcomes, including disaffiliation, switching, religious service attendance, and prayer.

The analyses are guided by the following hypotheses, developed from the foregoing discussion:

H1: There is an association between growing up in a single-parent (but not stepparent) family and religious outcomes in adulthood such that those from single-parent families will be more likely—vis-à-vis those whose parents did not divorce—to disaffiliate from religion, more likely to switch religions, less likely to regularly attend religious services, and less likely to pray at least daily.¹

H2: These associations will be reduced or eliminated once parental religious characteristics are accounted for.

H3: The associations between growing up in a single-parent family and religious outcomes will hold only for those who had two religious parents.

Although the use of GSS data forces reliance on retrospect accounts of parental religiosity and family structure from the respondents' perspective, simply having data on both parents' religious characteristics is rare. Most available large-scale data sets do not include data on the religious characteristics of respondents' biological or adoptive father or mother if the respondent's parents are no longer married or partnered; instead, they typically inquire about the religious characteristics of the parent respondent's current partner. Although one strategy to deal with this may be to restrict the analytic sample to those with married parents at the baseline survey (in longitudinal studies like the National Study of Youth and Religion, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, and the National Longitudinal Study of Youth), these data do not include information on the timing of subsequent parental divorce (i.e., whether it occurred in adolescence or young adulthood), and this strategy would exclude respondents whose parents divorced as young children—when parental divorce may be most salient for long term religious outcomes (Lawton and Bures 2001). The analyses would also be limited to young adults, so only short-term effects of parental divorce could be addressed. Thus, we believe the GSS data provide the best available information to test these hypotheses.

Data and Sample

The data for this study, as mentioned above, are pooled from the 1991, 1998, and 2008 NORC General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS is a full-probability, personal-interview survey designed to monitor changes in both social characteristics and attitudes among U.S. adults age 18 and older. The GSS has collected data almost annually from 1972–2010. The data are restricted to three waves because these are the only years in which variables for childhood, mother, and father religion are included. After restricting the sample to those raised in married-parent, divorced and single parent, or divorced and stepparent families, the working sample for the analyses is 3,346. Sample sizes are further reduced for the disaffiliation and switching outcomes because of conceptually important restrictions (i.e., restricting the disaffiliation sample to those who had a childhood affiliation, restricting the switching analysis to those who had both a childhood and adult affiliation). Missing values were imputed using multiple imputation techniques.² Missing data were minimal. The highest proportion of missing values for any one measure was for the mother's education variable with 7% missing values. The childhood religious service attendance variable had 4% missing values. The parent attendance variable had 3% missing values. No other variable exceeded 2% missing values.

Measures

Dependent Variables—We analyze four dichotomous outcomes: religious disaffiliation, religious switching, attending religious services near weekly or more, and praying daily or more. Religious disaffiliation is coded 1 for respondents who indicated that they were raised with a religious affiliation but said they had no religious affiliation as adults. Religious switching indicates that the respondent made a “major” switch in religious affiliation between childhood and adulthood. Respondents were classified similarly to the “RELTRAD” classification system (Steensland et al. 2000) for both their religion as a child and their current religion, with the exception that black Protestants were divided into their

¹As discussed above, the literature is not clear about the link between parental divorce and more personal religious outcomes. Some evidence suggests that non-organizational aspects of religion like prayer will not be affected by parental divorce (Zhai et al. 2007; Zhai et al. 2008). These authors argue that personal devotion and experience of the transcendent are less tied to childhood religious socialization than is formal religious participation. While this may be the case, they admit their explanation is speculative, and other evidence suggests non-organizational aspects of religion like religious salience decrease following parental breakups (Denton 2012) and for those in single parent families (Regnerus and Uecker 2006).

²Five data sets were imputed. For helpful discussions of multiple imputation see Acock (2005) or visit http://www.stata-press.com/manuals/mi_intro_substantive.pdf.

respective conservative and mainline Protestant groups. Thus, respondents were classified at both time points as conservative Protestant, mainline Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, “other” religion, or no religion. They are considered to have made a major switch if their current classification did not match their childhood classification.³ Regarding both disaffiliation and switching, respondents who said they were raised with no affiliation are excluded from the analysis. For switching, those who had no current affiliation were also excluded.

The other two dependent variables are respondents’ religious service attendance and prayer. GSS respondents were asked, “How often do you attend religious services?” Response categories range from “never” to “more than once a week.” The variable is dichotomized such that respondents who reported attending religious services “nearly every week” or more are coded 1 and the rest are coded 0. Respondents were also asked, “Now thinking about the present, about how often do you pray?” Respondents could choose from 11 response categories ranging from “never” to “several times a day.” We code those who responded that they prayed “once a day” or “several times a day” 1; the rest are coded 0.

Key Independent Variables—The key independent variables for this study are measures tapping whether those with divorced parents were living with a single parent or a parent and stepparent at age 16 and respondents’ parental religious characteristics (interacted with parent marital status). GSS asked respondents about their living situation at 16, and for those not living with their mother and father, they asked why this was the case. As mentioned above, all analyses are limited to those whose parents were still married and those whose parents were either divorced or separated. Those reporting living with their mother only or their father only are considered to be living with a single parent; those living with a mother and stepfather or a father and stepmother are considered to be living in a stepfamily. These are binary variables.

The 1991, 1998, and 2008 waves of the GSS ask respondents about the religious affiliation and religious service attendance of their mother and father when the respondent was a child. GSS asked, “What was your [mother’s/father’s] religious preference when you were a child?” and “When you were a child, how often did your [mother/father] attend religious services?”⁴ From these variables, we create two sets of dummy variables measuring parental religious characteristics at the couple-level. The first set of dummies measures parents’ religious affiliation and has six categories: parents had the same religious affiliation (reference group), parents had different Protestant affiliations, one parent was Catholic and one was Protestant, parents were affiliated with different religions altogether (e.g., Christian [Protestant or Catholic] and Jewish, Buddhist and Hindu), one parent was affiliated with a religion and one was not, and both parents were unaffiliated with a religion. A seventh category indicating the respondent did not know one or both of their parents’ affiliations is included in all models but not displayed in the results. The second set of dummies measures parents’ religious service attendance. This measure has four categories: both parents attended religious services at least nearly every week (reference group), one parent attended at least nearly every week but the other did not, and both attended services less than near-weekly. A fourth category indicating the respondent did not know one or both of their

³Those who made switches within the “other religion” category (e.g., from Hindu to Muslim) are also considered to have made a major switch.

⁴In some cases, it is possible respondents with stepparents who they consider to be their parent figure may answer these questions with their stepparent, and not their biological or adoptive parent, in mind. While this may introduce error, it also fits with the hypothesis that stepparents compensate for the loss of exposure to one’s biological or adoptive parent. We find no evidence that respondents raised in stepparent families differ from those from with continuously married parents both before and after we account for parental religious characteristics, so we suspect our results are not biased in any significant way. Nevertheless, remarriages may be slightly less homogenous religiously than first marriages (Dean and Gurak 1978), meaning individuals raised in stepfamilies may be underreporting (on average) their biological or adoptive parents’ religious homogeneity, and perhaps their parents’ religiosity as well.

parents' religious service attendance is included in the models but not displayed in the results. We create multiplicative interaction terms between parent marital status (married, single, remarried) at age 16 and both sets of parental religious characteristics variables. Interactions with parental religious affiliation created estimation problems due to small cell sizes in some categories and are not reported here.

Control Variables—We control for a number of factors that may co-vary with religious outcomes, parental divorce, and parental religious characteristics. These include gender (1=female), region of residence at age 16, current marital status, current parent status, educational attainment, mother's educational attainment, race, year of birth, age, religious tradition as a child (following the modified RELTRAD scheme described above), and near-weekly (or more frequent) religious service attendance at age 11–12. Descriptive statistics for all study variables are listed in Table 1.

Analytic Approach

In Tables 2 and 3 below, we present coefficients from logit regression models predicting religious outcomes by living situation at age 16 and parental religious characteristics. Each of these tables includes two outcomes with three models that follow the same modeling strategy. Models 1 include the childhood living situation variables and control variables. Models 2 add parental religious characteristics. Models 3 include an interaction between single and stepparent families and parental religious service attendance. When interpreting the interaction terms in Model 3, we follow the advice of Brambor and colleagues (2006), who encourage analysts to report not only the interaction terms and their significance, but also to calculate and report meaningful conditional effects. In our case, we are interested not only in statistical differences in the effect of parental marital status across categories of parental religious service attendance (which are given by the interaction term), but also in the effect of parental marital status for each category of parental religious service attendance, and whether that holds—or is statistically different from 0—for each category. In Models 3, the coefficient for the single parent and stepparent variables can be interpreted as the effect of these variables (relative to having married parents) when the conditioning variables (i.e., one irregularly or two irregularly attending parents) are 0—that is, when the respondent had two regularly attending parents. To calculate the effects of parental marital status for those with one or two irregularly attending parents, the coefficient for the relevant interaction term can be added to the coefficient for the relevant parental marital status. The standard error and p-values for these coefficients were calculated in ancillary analysis using a post-estimation command.⁵

Our modeling strategy is straightforward and parallels the three hypotheses listed above. The first models test H1. They are similar to previous analyses in studies of parental divorce (e.g., Lau and Wolfinger 2011; Zhai et al. 2007). The second models test H2 by showing parental divorce effects net of parental religious characteristics. The final models test H3 by showing whether family structure effects vary by parental religious characteristics. All data are weighted using the weight accompanying GSS data available at <http://sda.berkeley.edu/archive.htm>. This weight accounts for the non-respondent sub-sampling design employed by the GSS beginning in 2004, and adjusts for the unequal probability of selection into the sample created by differences in household size.

⁵Specifically, the *lincom* Stata command was used. As Jaccard (2001) points out, it is also possible to calculate these coefficients and standard errors by changing the group that is defined as the reference group and creating new interaction terms.

Table 4 below will help to interpret the interaction effects reported in the previous tables by reporting the average predicted probabilities for each combination of parental marital status and parental religious service attendance.⁶

Results

The first three columns of coefficients in Table 2 report unstandardized coefficients from logit regression models predicting religious disaffiliation from one's childhood religion. As Model 1 shows, living with a single parent following parental divorce increases the odds of religious disaffiliation as an adult vis-à-vis growing up in a married-parent⁷ household ($\beta = .90$; $e^{\beta} = 2.46$). In other words, adults who lived with a single parent during their formative years have more than twice the odds of disaffiliating as those who lived with continuously married parents. This is consistent with the findings of Lawton and Bures (2001) and Lau and Wolfinger (2011). Model 1 also reveals no statistically significant effect of divorce on religious disaffiliation for those who were living with a stepparent at age 16 compared to those with married parents. These results from Model 1 provide solid support for H1.

Model 2 shows that although parental religious characteristics account for some of the effect of growing up with a single parent following parental divorce (y-standardized coefficients—not shown—suggest 28% of the effect is explained⁸), living with a single parent still has an independent effect on one's odds of disaffiliation ($\beta = .68$; $e^{\beta} = 1.97$). The sizable reduction in the size of the coefficient between Models 1 and 2 is in line with H2. Parental religious characteristics also exert their own independent effect on religious disaffiliation (net of childhood religious service attendance and other factors). Adults who had parents with different religions altogether ($\beta = 1.11$; $e^{\beta} = 3.03$), one unaffiliated parent ($\beta = 1.26$; $e^{\beta} = 3.53$), and two unaffiliated parents ($\beta = 1.22$; $e^{\beta} = 3.56$) have much higher odds of disaffiliation than those with two parents who had the same religious affiliation. Parental religious service attendance during childhood, however, has no significant effect on disaffiliation from religion in adulthood.

H3 receives only modest support from the results in Model 3. The effect of living with a single parent for those who had two parents who attended religious services near weekly or more often is large and significant ($\beta = 1.05$; $e^{\beta} = 2.86$), as predicted by H3. The interaction effects are negative, indicating a stronger effect of growing up with a single parent for those with two religiously active parents than for those with one or no religiously active parents. These interaction terms are not significant, however, indicating no significant difference in the effect of parental divorce by parental religious service attendance. Thus, there is not strong evidence to suggest that the single-parent family effect differs across categories of parental religiosity. In ancillary analyses, we find that the effect of having a single parent—compared to married parents—for those with one irregular attending parent is not statistically significant, but the effect of having a single parent—compared to married parents—for those with two irregularly attending parents is significant. So while the effect of growing up with a single parent is largest among those from families with two regularly

⁶In Table 4, we report statistical differences based on p-values from one-tailed tests, as opposed to two-tailed tests, in order to keep the findings consistent with the statistically significant coefficients in Models 3 (derived from two-tailed tests) of Tables 2-3. The p-values vary between tables because the statistical significance of an independent variable (as well as its coefficient) in a nonlinear model is dependent on the values of the other independent variables in the model (see <http://www.nd.edu/~rwilliam/stats3/L06.pdf>). Two of the four statistically significant differences reported in Table 4 are only significant at $p < .10$ using two-tailed tests, but are derived from a model in which the relevant coefficient is statistically significant at $p < .05$. In Table 4, the two differences that are statistically different at $p < .05$ for two-tailed tests are (1) the difference in disaffiliation between respondents with two religiously active parents who were raised by married and single parents and (2) the difference in religious service attendance between respondents with two religiously active parents who were raised by single parents and those raised by married parents.

⁷For the sake of parsimony, we use the term "married parents" throughout to refer to "married biological or adoptive parents."

⁸For a discussion of y-standardized coefficients, see <http://www.nd.edu/~rwilliam/stats3/L06.pdf>.

attending parents, and while the effect does not hold for those with only one regularly attending parent, this can only be interpreted as very modest evidence for H3.

The findings for major religious switches are presented in the final three columns of Table 2. The coefficient for living with a single parent in Model 1 is significant and positive, indicating that respondents growing up in a single parent family have higher odds of switching religious affiliations than those who grow up with married parents ($\beta = .56$; $\sigma^2 = 1.75$), as H1 would predict. Respondents from stepfamilies do not have significantly higher odds of switching religions than those from married parent families, though the difference approaches significance with a p-value of .05. Model 2 supports H2: differences among those with different childhood family structures are reduced once parental religious characteristics are introduced into the model. Y-standardized coefficients—not shown—suggest 30% of the single-parent effect in Model 1 is explained by parental religious characteristics; including parental religious characteristics in the model eliminates almost half of the (nearly significant) effect of stepfamilies. Parental religious characteristics, in turn, are associated with religious switching in adulthood. Respondents with one Protestant and one Catholic parent, as well as those with one affiliated and one unaffiliated parent, have higher odds of switching religions than those who had religiously homogamous parents. Those who had only one regularly attending parent also have higher odds than those with two regularly attending parents of having switched affiliations from their childhood affiliation.

In Model 3, the effect of being raised in a single parent family is largest (but not statistically significant) for those from families with two religiously active parents, but the differences in the effect are not significant across categories of parental religious service attendance, again providing little support for H3. Interestingly, although there is no effect of being raised in a stepparent family for religious switching in Model 2, the effect of living with a stepparent is both substantively large and statistically significant for those who had two religiously active parents in Model 3 ($\beta = 1.17$; $\sigma^2 = 3.22$), indicating that among those with two religiously active parents, those in stepfamilies have more than three times higher odds of switching religious affiliations as those who grew up with stably married parents. However, this is not the case for those with stepparents who both were irregular attendees (the interaction effect, $\beta = -1.41$, is significant), nor for those with only one married parent. The effect for growing up in a stepparent family (compared to those growing up in a married parent family) for those having either one or two irregularly attending parents is not significant (results not shown).

The first three columns of coefficients in Table 3 explore the relationship between parental divorce and near-weekly religious service attendance. Model 1 finds a negative, statistically significant association between growing up in a single parent family and near-weekly religious service attendance as an adult compared to growing up in a married parent family ($\beta = -.40$; $\sigma^2 = .67$)—which is consistent with previous findings suggesting a negative effect of parental divorce on religious service attendance (Zhai et al. 2007)—but no effect of growing up in a stepfamily. These findings once again support H1. In Model 2, the effect of living with a single parent on religious service attendance in adulthood is greatly reduced and is no longer statistically significant (y-standardized coefficients—not shown—suggest 64% of the effect is explained). This indicates that the lower odds of attending religious services near weekly or more among respondents from single parent families compared to married parent families is explained by parental religious characteristics, as H2 asserts. In Model 2 there is a strong effect of parental religious service attendance on respondent religious service attendance in adulthood (net of the respondent's service attendance as a child). Those who had only one regularly attending parent have much lower odds of attending services regularly as adults than those with two regularly attending parents ($\beta = -$.

83; $e^{\beta} = .44$). Those who had two irregularly attending parents also have lower odds of attending regularly as adults ($\beta = -1.05$; $e^{\beta} = .35$). Furthermore, there is a strong positive effect of growing up with parents from different Protestant denominations, compared to same-affiliation parents, on religious service attendance in adulthood. We suspect this may simply be the result of more religious respondents being better able to recall the specific denominations of each of their parents. Respondents whose parents were affiliated with different religions altogether were also more likely than those with parents with the same affiliation to be regular religious service attenders in adulthood, though this is a small group.

Model 3 reveals an interaction between living with a single parent and parental religiosity, providing support for H3. Model 3 shows a strong, negative effect of being raised by a single parent compared to being raised by married parents for those who had two religious parents ($\beta = -1.26$; $e^{\beta} = .28$). The difference between those from single-parent and married-parent families is nonexistent, however, for those who had only one or no religiously active parents (effects of $\beta = .21$ and $\beta = -.39$, respectively, calculated by adding the coefficient from the interaction term to the single-parent effect). The interaction for having two irregularly attending parents is significant at $p < .10$, but not $p < .05$, so this should be interpreted with some caution. Those who lived with a stepparent do not differ significantly from those who lived with married parents, irrespective of parent religiosity.

The results for daily prayer appear in the last three columns of Table 3. None of the models reveal any significant effects of parental divorce on praying daily as an adult, whether the respondent was eventually raised in a stepparent or single parent family. This comports with the findings of Zhai and colleagues (2007), who found evidence of effects of parental divorce for institutional aspects of religion but not more private, individual aspects, but it does not support H1. In Model 3, adults who grew up in single-parent families are less likely to pray daily than those who grew up with married parents when both of their parents were religiously active, though the difference is not significant ($\beta = -.46$; $e^{\beta} = .63$). The interaction terms for those raised in single parent homes by parental religious characteristics are large and positive, but not statistically significant. In ancillary analysis (not shown), when we model the prayer variable continuously rather than as a dichotomous variable, we do find that there is a negative effect of growing up with a single parent (compared to growing up with married parents) on the frequency of prayer for those with two religiously active parents, but not for those with only one or no religiously active parents. This evidence is tenuous, but it does suggest the parental divorce effect could span institutional and non-institutional aspects of religion for those who are at risk of losing an agent of religious socialization. There are, moreover, some strong and significant parental religiosity effects on daily prayer in adulthood. Respondents who grew up with one Protestant and one Catholic parent are more likely to pray daily than those with two parents adhering to the same religious tradition. Those with one or two irregularly attending parents are less likely than those with two regularly attending parents to pray daily as adults, net of a number of factors including their childhood religious service attendance.

Table 4 helps to make sense of the interaction effects reported in the previous two tables. This table reports average predicted probabilities for different combinations of parental marital status and parental religious service attendance. In terms of disaffiliation, the positive effect of growing up in a single parent home with two regularly attending parents is clear and statistically significant: There is a .20 probability that such an adult will disaffiliate from religion, compared to just a .09 probability that an adult from a family with two married parents who regularly attended church would do the same. The differences between those with married parents and those with single parents are somewhat sizable as well for those with one or two irregularly attending parents. For those with one irregularly attending parent, those from married households have a .09 probability of disaffiliating compared to .

13 for single parent households (a 44% increase)—though this difference is not statistically significant. For those with two irregularly attending parents, the probability is .08 for those with married parents and .15 for those with single parents (a 88% increase)—a difference that is statistically significant. The predicted probabilities for respondents from stepfamilies never deviate more than .03 (or 38%) from the married-parent respondents and are never statistically significant.

For switching, there are no statistically significant differences in the probability that a person raised in a family with two married parents will switch affiliations compared to those raised in a family situation with a single parent across all three categories of parental religious service attendance, though the size of some of the effects is somewhat substantial (.12 vs. .22 for two regularly attending parents, .17 vs. .22 for one irregularly attending parent, and .17 vs. .25 for two irregularly attending parents). The difference among those with regularly attending parents in married and stepparent families is statistically significant, with the former having only a .12 probability of switching and the latter a .30 probability. The difference for one irregularly attending parent is sizable but not significant (.17 for married parents and .24 for stepparents), and it clearly does not hold for those with two irregularly attending parents (probability of .17 for married parents and .14 for stepparents).

Adults who were raised in a single parent family and who had two religiously active parents have a .21 probability of attending religious services near-weekly or more. Those who were raised in a married parent family and who had two religiously active parents, on the other hand, have a .44 probability of near-weekly religious service attendance—a statistically significant difference. Similar substantive and significant differences are not evident for other respondents from married and single parent families, however. For example, among those with one irregularly attending parent, adults who had single parents have a .30 probability of being a regularly attending adult, compared to a .26 probability for those with married parents. Similarly, among those with two irregularly attending parents, adults from married parent homes had a probability of .23 of attending regularly compared to .17 for those from single parent homes. Respondents raised in stepparent families are not significantly different from those raised in married parent families.

There were no significant effects for daily prayer in Table 3, and none of the predicted probabilities are statistically significant in Table 4. The final column of Table 4 does show some sizable differences, however—for example, the difference between respondents with two regularly attending parents who grew up in married parent and single parent homes and stepfamilies. The probability that these respondents from married-parent families will pray at least daily as an adult is .53 compared to just .44 for respondents from single-parent families and .46 for respondents from stepfamilies. Respondents raised in stepfamilies with only one regularly attending parent also have a higher probability of praying daily than their counterparts from married- and single-parent families (.54 versus .44 and .45 respectively). Again, however, none of these differences are statistically significant.

Thus, in sum, models including interaction effects offer clear support for H3 only for religious service attendance, though there is some other modest evidence that the parental divorce effect may be the strongest—or only hold—for those who had two regularly attending parents in childhood for the other outcomes as well. Additionally, although there is no effect of growing up in a stepparent family on any outcome, the interaction effects reveal that those growing up with a stepparent and two religiously active parents are much more likely to switch their religious affiliation than those who grew up with married parents who were both religiously active.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has sought to specify the relationship between parental divorce and subsequent religiosity in adulthood, and to give some indication of why this relationship might exist. To answer these questions, we explored a number of religious outcomes and looked at how adults raised in single parent families and stepfamilies differ religiously from those raised in continuously married parent families. We also considered the religious context of the respondents' family prior to their parents' divorce; that is, we accounted for the religious characteristics of both parents and examined how the effect of divorce varies by those characteristics. The results provide a more complete picture of how parental divorce affects the religious lives of adults in the United States.

Our findings are mostly supportive of H1. Adults from single-parent families are more likely to disaffiliate from religion altogether and more likely to make a major switch in their religious affiliation. They are also less likely to attend religious services regularly. There is no statistically significant effect of growing up with a single parent on praying daily, however, which does not support H1 but which does accord with the findings of Zhai and colleagues (2007, 2008), who argued that parental divorce affects institutional but not private aspects of religious life. Moreover, adults raised in stepparent families do not differ statistically on any outcome in question, though the difference is nearly significant for religious switching.

We also find considerable support for H2, which predicted that accounting for parental religiosity (i.e., selection effects) would reduce or eliminate the parental divorce effect. The single parent effects on disaffiliation and switching are reduced by about 30% once parental religious characteristics are controlled. Parental religious characteristics also explain about two thirds of the effect of growing up with a single parent on religious service attendance and render its effect nonsignificant.

We find modest support for H3. Growing up in a single-parent home affects the religious service attendance of only those in single parent families who had two religious parents. This may also be the case for daily prayer, though the statistical significance of our results there varies by model specification (and is not significant in the model presented). Furthermore, growing up in a single parent family appears to affect religious disaffiliation and religious switching most strongly when both the respondents' parents were religious, though the differences by parental characteristics are not statistically significant.

These findings have two major implications for our understanding of parental divorce and religiosity. First, they suggest that the previously documented effect of being raised in a single parent family on religious outcomes in adulthood is overstated. At least some of this relationship instead appears to be the effect of parental religious characteristics. In fact, in the case of religious service attendance, growing up in a single parent family does not have an independent, statistically significant effect in adulthood. Our findings suggest that the lower levels of religious service attendance among adults whose parents divorced are not due to the loss of religious socialization from one's father following parental divorce (Zhai et al. 2007), but rather a lack of religious socialization from one's father both prior to and following the divorce.

That said, the second major implication here is that loss of religious socialization does appear to be the mechanism that best explains the effects of family structure identified in this study. Parental divorce does not exert a strong effect on the entire population of children of divorce for two significant reasons: (1) A minority of these respondents were in a position to receive significant amounts of religious socialization from each of their parents to begin with—only 16% of these respondents report having two religiously active parents while

growing up (results not shown), and (2) many of these respondents receive compensatory religious socialization from a stepparent. But there is solid evidence that losing regular access to a religious parent has some religious consequences when the void is unfilled by a stepparent. In other words, parental divorce may be quite salient for the religious lives of those who are most “at-risk”—those with two religiously active parents.

Although we believe loss of socialization explains the results we find here, we are less able to speculate about the exact processes through which socialization is disrupted. Whether it be decreased spiritual modeling or capital, decreased parental religiosity as a result of perceived or real stigmatization, hampered parent-child relationships, logistical difficulty in getting to church, or something else entirely we cannot say, though identifying these pathways is a worthy goal for future research. We do believe, however, that direct emotional responses on the part of children to their parents’ divorce are not the primary mechanisms through which parental divorce influences subsequent religiosity. Were this the case, those raised in stepfamilies should be equally affected by parental divorce as those in single parent families, and religiosity would not vary at all by parental religious characteristics. Nevertheless, these findings cannot speak to the short-term consequences of parental divorce; the emotional effects or feelings of sacred loss may well be felt and consequential during childhood and adolescence. In the long run, however, these emotional responses are less consequential.

In light of these findings and implications, we argue it is imperative to consider the religious context in which parental divorce occurs. This argument is in keeping with that of another recent study of family transitions and religiosity (Denton 2012) that argued religious consequences of parental divorce and remarriage are highly contingent on the religious profiles of the adolescents themselves at the time of their parents’ breakup.⁹ We suggest these types of contextual examinations may help to explain the diverse and nuanced religious responses that result from parental divorce. In particular, exploring the potential buffering effects of friendship groups, school and church environments, and extended family could shed additional light on this relationship.

Our findings also largely confirm those of recent studies that find no religious effect of parental divorce on subsequent religiosity for those in stepfamilies (Lau and Wolfinger 2011; Petts 2009; Regnerus and Uecker 2006; Smith and Denton 2005) and complement other studies of divorce and child well-being that suggest parental remarriage may offset some of the effects of parental divorce (Artis 2007; Brown 2004; Manning and Lamb 2003). In only one case does being raised in a stepparent family predict a religious outcome in adulthood. Adults who were raised in a stepfamily and had two religious parents were more likely to switch than those from married parent families with two religious parents. This suggests that the religious plausibility structure of a child can be affected when a stepparent exposes the child to a new religious tradition in the family context. Even so, it appears stepparent families are not more or less effective socializing agents than married parent families in terms of *level* of religiosity, but they may influence the specific *type* of religion that is transmitted.

Though not the central focus of this study, our findings also suggest that parental religious characteristics influence adult religious outcomes above and beyond their influence on childhood religiosity and religious affiliation. Even accounting for religious service attendance as a child, parental religious characteristics are strongly associated with respondents’ religious outcomes as adults. Moreover, our findings show that the religious

⁹Although we explored the possibility of differences by childhood religiosity (i.e., attendance at age 11–12), we did not find any statistically significant interaction effects between childhood religiosity and family structure at age 16.

characteristics of both parents matter for religious socialization. This is supportive of the conclusions of other recent scholarship highlighting the prominent role of parents in their children's religious lives (e.g., Smith and Denton 2005).

On a more methodological note, future research assessing the impact of childhood characteristics on religion in later stages of the life course should account for parental religiosity and affiliation. Failing to do so could result in overestimating the effects of these other characteristics, as appears to be the case with studies of parental divorce. Thus, large-scale data collection efforts should seek to obtain the religious characteristics of respondents' mothers and fathers (as well as stepparents, which was not obtained in the GSS), and optimally their parents' religious characteristics both before and after the divorce (also not obtained in the GSS). Although these GSS data have many advantages, they are limited in scope as well as sample size. A larger sample would enable more nuanced investigations (e.g., mother vs. father religiosity, resident vs. nonresident parent religiosity). Nevertheless, our analysis of GSS data suggests that average effects of parental divorce are limited (except in the case of religious disaffiliation), but parental divorce may have long-term religious consequences for those who had two religious parents and whose custodial parent did not remarry.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Study Variables

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>
Disaffiliated from religion	.09		0, 1
Major switch in religious affiliation	.16		0, 1
Attends religious services near weekly or more	.32		0, 1
Prays daily or more	.47		0, 1
Married parent family at age 16	.85		0, 1
Divorced/separated, single parent family at age 16	.10		0, 1
Divorced, stepparent family at age 16	.05		0, 1
Parents have same religious affiliation	.67		0, 1
Parents have different Protestant affiliations	.07		0, 1
Protestant-Catholic parents	.07		0, 1
Parents have different religions	.02		0, 1
One unaffiliated parent	.07		0, 1
Both parents unaffiliated	.03		0, 1
Don't know one or more parents' affiliation	.07		0, 1
Both parents regularly attended religious services	.37		0, 1
One parent irregularly attended religious services	.19		0, 1
Both parents irregularly attended religious services	.35		0, 1
Don't know one or more parents' attendance	.09		0, 1
Raised conservative Protestant	.35		0, 1
Raised mainline Protestant	.21		0, 1
Raised Catholic	.33		0, 1
Raised Jewish	.02		0, 1
Raised other religion	.04		0, 1
Raised no religion	.05		0, 1
Attended religious services near weekly or more at age 11–12	.65		0, 1
Female	.54		0, 1
Lived outside US at age 16	.07		0, 1
Lived in Northeast at age 16	.20		0, 1
Lived in Midwest at age 16	.26		0, 1
Lived in South at age 16	.30		0, 1
Lived in West at age 16	.16		0, 1
Less than high school degree	.15		0, 1
High school degree	.53		0, 1
Junior college degree	.07		0, 1
Bachelor's degree	.17		0, 1
Graduate degree	.08		0, 1
Mother less than high school degree	.36		0, 1
Mother high school degree	.49		0, 1
Mother junior college degree	.04		0, 1

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>
Mother bachelor's degree	.09		0, 1
Mother graduate degree	.03		0, 1
White	.83		0, 1
Black	.11		0, 1
Other	.06		0, 1
Year of birth	1954.56	17.55	1902-1990
Age	44.47	16.59	18-89
Married	.50		0, 1
Remarried	.14		0, 1
Divorced	.13		0, 1
Never married	.23		0, 1
Has child(ren)	.72		0, 1

Note: Statistics are for the full analytic sample (used for the religious service attendance and prayer outcomes).

Table 2
Unstandardized Coefficients from Logistic Regression Models Predicting Religious Disaffiliation and Switching

	Religious Disaffiliation (N=3164)			Religious Switching (N=2864)		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<i>Parent Marital Status at Age 16</i>						
(Reference group: Married)						
Divorced/separated, single parent	.90***	.68**	1.05*	.56**	.42*	.76
Divorced, stepparent	.38	.14	-.39	.47	.27	1.17*
<i>Parents' Religious Affiliation</i>						
(Reference group: Same affiliation)						
Different Protestant affiliations		-.13	-.13		.40	.36
Protestant-Catholic		.25	.24		.76***	.75***
Different religions		1.11*	1.12*		-.15	-.15
One unaffiliated		1.26***	1.27***		.72**	.72**
Both unaffiliated		1.27**	1.28**		.34	.38
<i>Parents' Religious Service Attendance</i>						
(Reference group: Both regular attenders)						
One irregular attender		-.12	-.04		.37*	.42*
Both irregular attenders		-.09	-.09		.32	.40*
<i>Interaction Terms</i>						
Divorced/separated, single parent at 16 x						
One irregular attender			-.56			-.43
Both irregular attenders			-.33			-.27
Divorced, stepparent at 16 x						
One irregular attender			.27			-.70
Both irregular attenders			.74			-1.41*

Source: General Social Survey 1991, 1998, 2008.

Note: All models include, but do not display, controls for gender, marital status, parent status, region raised in, educational attainment, mother's educational attainment, race, age, year born, religious service attendance at age 11-12, and religion raised in.

* p < .05

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p < .01

p < .001 (two-tailed tests).

Table 3
Unstandardized Coefficients from Logit Regression Models Predicting Frequency of Religious Service Attendance and Prayer

	Religious Service Attendance			Prayer	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2
<i>Parent Marital Status at Age 16</i>					
(Reference group: Married)					
Divorced/Separated, single parent	-.40*	-.14	-1.26***	.05	.19
Divorced, stepparent	-.10	.08	-.20	.03	.13
Parents' Religious Affiliation					
(Reference group: Same affiliation)					
Different Protestant affiliations	.54**		.58**		.28
Protestant-Catholic	-.12		-.11		.38*
Different religions	.93**		.91**		.44
One unaffiliated	.24		.23		-.05
Both unaffiliated	.22		.21		-.34
Parents' Religious Service Attendance					
(Reference group: Both regular attenders)					
One irregular attender	-.83***		-.90***		-.43***
Both irregular attenders	-1.05***		-1.11***		-.61***
<i>Interaction Terms</i>					
Divorced/separated, single parent at 16 x					
One irregular attender			1.47**		.52
Both irregular attenders			.87		.64
Divorced, stepparent at 16 x					
One irregular attender			-.12		.88
Both irregular attenders			.62		.51

Source: General Social Survey 1991, 1998, 2008.

Note: All models include, but do not display, controls for gender, marital status, parent status, region raised in, educational attainment, mother's educational attainment, race, age, year born, religious service attendance at age 11-12, and religion raised in.

*
p < .05

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**
p < .01

p < .001 (two-tailed tests), N=3346.

Table 4

Average Predicted Probabilities by Parents' Religious Service Attendance and Parental Marital Status at Age 16

	<i>Disaffiliated</i>	<i>Switched</i>	<i>Attend</i>	<i>Pray</i>
<i>Both Regular Attenders</i>				
Married parents	.09	.12	.44	.53
Divorced/separated, single parent	.20	.22	.21	.44
Divorced, stepparent	.07	.30	.40	.46
<i>One Irregular Attender</i>				
Married parents	.09	.17	.26	.44
Divorced/Separated, single parent	.13	.22	.30	.45
Divorced, stepparent	.08	.24	.21	.54
<i>Both Irregular Attenders</i>				
Married parents	.08	.17	.23	.40
Divorced/Separated, single parent	.15	.25	.17	.44
Divorced, stepparent	.11	.14	.30	.42

Note: Estimates are produced from Models 3 in Tables 2-3. Probabilities in boldface are statistically different at $p < .05$ (one-tailed tests) from probabilities for those with married parents within the same category of parental religious service attendance. Significance tests were only performed for comparisons of married-parent respondents to single-parent and stepparent respondents with the same parental religious service attendance.