**The rhetoric and reality of Protestant fertility in the United States**

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Protestant groups in the United States do not usually make official statements regarding optimal fertility levels or birth control practices. However, prominent Protestant leaders advocate four distinct approaches to fertility: Religious Malthusianism, Implicit Natalism, Patriarchal Moderate Natalism, and Patriarchal Extreme Natalism. Scholars have suggested that fertility levels among religious groups have converged but I present new evidence that fertility levels are approximately 10 percent higher among women attending evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, and Catholic congregations compared with women who attend mainline Protestant congregations. Women with no religious affiliation and women who do not regularly attend worship services have much lower fertility than women who have religious affiliations and women who are active in congregations.

## Protestant rhetoric regarding fertility

The teachings of religious groups may influence the fertility-related behavior of adherents. Roman Catholics officially proscribe artificial birth control and Latter-day Saints place special theological emphasis on large families (Blake 1984; Heaton 1986; Heaton 1989; Thornton 1979). Most other large denominations in the United States lack official teaching against birth control and official doctrines encouraging high fertility.[1] Among Protestant denominations, I identify four approaches to fertility: Religious Malthusianism, Implicit Natalism, Patriarchal Moderate Natalism, and Patriarchal Extreme Natalism (Table 0.1). Religious Malthusianism advocates fertility rates capped at replacement level for the sake of environmental responsibility. Implicit Natalism is sympathetic to egalitarian gender roles and unlikely to discourage use of contraception or to encourage high fertility explicitly. However, Implicit Natalists celebrate the role of children in congregational life, speak fondly of children, and generally portray children as positive elements of religious, social, and congregational life. Patriarchal Moderate Natalists celebrate children and revere traditional gender roles. While they discourage childlessness, they are not against family planning (Ellison and Goodson 1997; Goodson 1997). The Patriarchal Moderate Natalist position is regularly articulated in the pages of *Christianity Today*, the flagship journal of evangelical Protestantism in the United States (Fields 2006; Leeuwen 2001; Staff 2004; Torode and Torode 2001). [2] Patriarchal Extreme Natalists teach that couples should be open to as many children as God provides and should not seek to limit childbearing by using contraceptive technology or natural family planning. These approaches are ideal types. Individual congregations may have manifestations of multiple approaches present simultaneously.

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[1] Mainline Protestants have generally not taken public stances about ideal fertility levels, although there is strong evidence that the declining portion of the population affiliated with these denominations is largely the result of decades of relatively low fertility among these groups (Hout, Greeley, and Wilde 2001).

[2] In an online Christianity Today article, a parent is quoted as saying, “We have never heard a Christian parent say, “You know, I really regret having that fifth child” (Moll 2007).

*In the full paper, I elaborate this typology of approaches to fertility among Protestants and document the exhortations of influential leaders and movements associated with each approach.*

**The empirical reality of Protestant fertility**

Historically, important differences have been observed between religious groups (Coale and Watkins 1986; Lenski 1977). Following World War II, demographers highlighted the differential fertility of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews in the United States. Young Catholic women who married in the early 1950s had about four births, while their non-Catholic counterparts had about three (Westoff and Jones 1979). High fertility in the nation's biggest denomination helped produce a large "Baby Boom" cohort of disproportionately Catholic origin. As the Carter administration ended, so too do did the era of high Catholic fertility. Recent studies suggest that religious fertility differentials are disappearing. According to a review of the literature in the early nineties, "contemporary analyses point to the "end" of the religious factor in determining family size in low fertility societies" (Goldscheider and Mosher 1991: 102). Religious affiliation may be influential for contraceptive patterns and the timing of childbirth "but not necessarily for family size" (1991: 112).

The most recent comprehensive analysis of religion and fertility in the United States is based on data from the 1982 and 1988 waves of the National Survey of Family Growth (Mosher, Williams, and Johnson 1992). Studies that are more recent only address the fertility differentials between large religious groups. For example, one study documents that during the Baby Boom period, evangelical Protestants as well as Catholics had high fertility (Hout, Greeley, and Wilde 2001). Another study documents Catholic and Protestant fertility differences in the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth, but its principal focus is explaining variation between U.S. and European fertility patterns (Frejka and Westoff 2006). Scholars have suggested that the fertility rates of religious groups have converged in recent decades but there is little evidence published to evaluate whether this claim is true for the many Protestant denominations with millions of members or for various non-Christian religions in the United States.

In my research for this paper, I have drawn upon a variety of national surveys, including surveys commonly used in the study of fertility and/or religion, such as the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), the Current Population Survey (CPS), and the General Social Survey (GSS). I have also evaluated differences in household size using two very large phone-based surveys, the Pew Religious Landscape Survey (Pew) and the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS). In addition to these surveys, I analyze the innovative 2001 Congregational Life Survey (CLS). The CLS provides information on the congregational participation and children ever born to over 100,000 men and women who were surveyed in over 400 congregations. In most analysis, I focus on a subsample of women in their childbearing years. I exclude men from the analysis for two reasons. First, men are known to provide less reliable information about their fertility than women do. Second, many of the men participating in congregations share a household with women completing a survey. By only counting women, I reduce the likelihood of counting children from the same household twice.

*The attached tables document some of the results from this analysis. The full paper provides full discussion of these results and how they relate to the natalism*

*typology introduced earlier. Additional analysis and discussion addresses the fertility gap between religious women and secular women by comparing fertility of women with and without affiliations as well as women who do and do not regularly participate in a congregation.*

**Table 0.1. Ideal types of religious fertility in the United States**

| Model | Ideal number of kids | Gender role ideal | Religious tradition |
|---|---|---|---|
| Religious Malthusianism | 0-2 | Egalitarian | Some mainline Protestants, politically liberal non-Christian religions |
| Implicit Natalism | 2-3 | Egalitarian | Mainline Protestant |
| Patriarchal Moderate Natalism | 2-4 | Complementarian | Evangelical Protestant |
| Patriarchal Extreme Natalism | The more, the better | Complementarian | Some evangelical Protestants |

**Table 0.2. Percent of women 35-49 with either at least three children ever born or no children ever born, by denomination (CLS 2001)**

| Religious Tradition | Denomination | Three or more children ever born | No children ever born | N |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Black | Baptist (unspecified) | 43 | 10 | 83 |
| Protestant | National Baptist Convention | 37 | 11 | 160 |
| | **Total** | **39** | **11** | **243** |
| Catholic | Roman Catholic Church | 37 | 13 | 11088 |
| | **Total** | **37** | **13** | **11088** |
| Evangelical | Anderson Church of God | 59 | 4 | 51 |
| Protestant | Foursquare Gospel | 59 | 7 | 138 |
| | Pentecostal | 50 | 9 | 22 |
| | Conservative Baptist Association | 50 | 10 | 40 |
| | Presbyterian Church in America | 42 | 6 | 67 |
| | Mennonite Church | 38 | 0 | 21 |
| | Seventh-Day Adventist | 37 | 17 | 30 |
| | Non-Denominational Christian | 37 | 17 | 586 |
| | Non-Denominational Pentecostal | 36 | 23 | 102 |
| | Church of God Tennessee | 36 | 12 | 86 |
| | Churches of Christ | 35 | 6 | 122 |
| | Assemblies of God | 33 | 11 | 228 |
| | Lutheran Ch., Missouri Synod | 33 | 9 | 623 |
| | Southern Baptist Convention | 31 | 8 | 1219 |
| | Baptist (unspecified) | 31 | 17 | 593 |
| | United Baptist | 29 | 5 | 21 |
| | **Total** | **34** | **11** | **3949** |
| Mainline | Disciples of Christ | 36 | 9 | 33 |
| Protestant | Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) | 31 | 13 | 378 |
| | Evangelical Lutheran Ch. in Am. | 31 | 10 | 1160 |
| | United Church of Christ | 29 | 13 | 121 |
| | United Methodist Church | 27 | 12 | 1285 |
| | Episcopal Church | 26 | 15 | 313 |
| | American Baptist Churches | 21 | 16 | 38 |
| | **Total** | **29** | **12** | **3328** |
| Other | Mormon (LDS) | 52 | 0 | 25 |
| | Greek Orthodox Archdiocese | 33 | 15 | 48 |
| | Association of Unity Churches | 24 | 15 | 33 |
| | Unitarian Universalist Association | 19 | 13 | 132 |
| | Buddhist Community | 17 | 33 | 30 |
| | Reform Judaism | 15 | 19 | 27 |
| | Total | 24 | 15 | 295 |
| **Grand Total** | | **35** | **12** | **18903** |

Data: Congregational Life Survey, 2001.

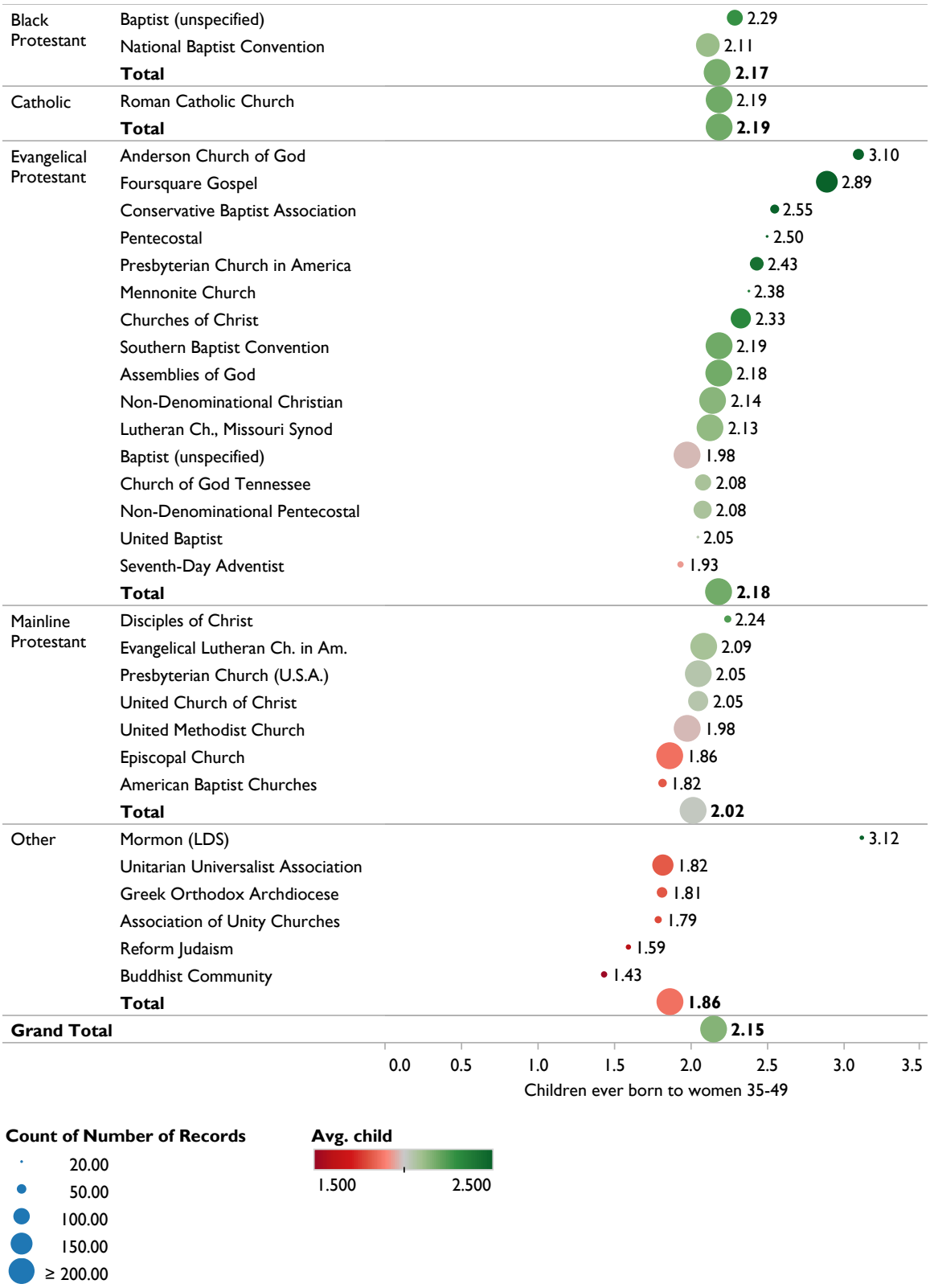


**Figure 0.1. Children ever born to women 35-49, by denomination. Source: CLS 2001.**

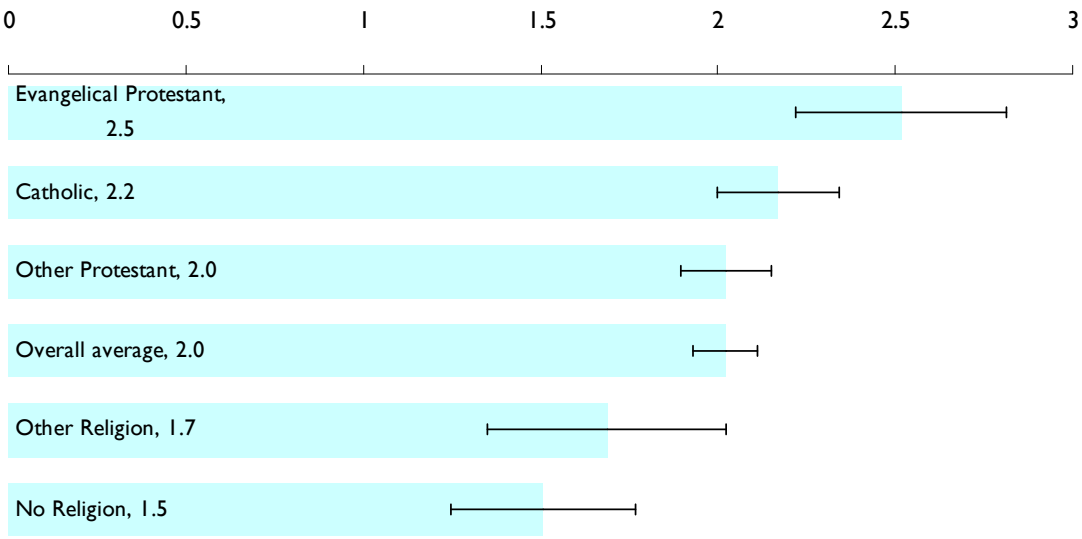


**Figure 0.2. Children ever born to women 35-44, by religious affiliation.**
**Source: NSFG 2002. Note: Data are weighted to account for complex survey design. Black bars designate the 95% confidence interval.**

**Table 0.3. Distribution of children ever born to women 40-44, by religious tradition and national average**

| Children ever born | Black Protestant | Catholic | Evangelical Protestant | Mainline Protestant | National average |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0 | 8.6 | 10.8 | 10.0 | 9.8 | 19.0 |
| 1 | 20.4 | 12.6 | 12.5 | 13.5 | 16.4 |
| 2 | 37.6 | 38.9 | 41.2 | 47.0 | 35.0 |
| 3 | 23.7 | 24.5 | 24.2 | 21.0 | 19.1 |
| 4 | 6.5 | 9.2 | 7.2 | 6.7 | 7.2 |
| 5 or 6 | 2.2 | 3.4 | 3.6 | 1.3 | 2.8 |
| 7 or more | 1.1 | 0.7 | 1.3 | 0.8 | 0.5 |

Data: CLS 2001 (religious fertility), June 2000 CPS (national average) as printed in Table H2 http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/fertility.html.

# Appendix

Surveys vary in their strengths and weaknesses. No one survey is sufficient for answering questions about the relationship between religion and fertility. In this paper, I use several data sets, including the Current Population Survey, the National Survey of Family Growth, the Pew Religious Landscape Survey, and the American Religious Identification Survey. I rely most heavily upon the Congregational Life Survey (CLS), which is a more recent and less utilized resource than most of the other data sets. Since this dataset may be unfamiliar to many researchers, this appendix discusses data considerations related to the CLS.

**The Congregational Life Survey**

All religious congregations were eligible to participate in the CLS, including mosques, temples, and synagogues. However, the majority of congregations in the sample are Christian congregations. There is no complete list of congregations in the United States so it is difficult to design a sampling frame from which to draw a random sample. The CLS follows the innovative sampling method of the National Congregations Study, which collected a random sample of congregations, based on the congregational affiliations of all respondents who reported attending worship services at least once a year in the nationally representative General Social Survey (Chaves, Konieczny, Beyerlein, and Barman 1999). The National Congregations Study surveyed key informants from each congregation. The CLS used the same method to design its national sample, based on the congregational affiliations of 2000 General Social Survey respondents who worship at least annually. Based on information provided by respondents about the name and location of their congregation, the National Opinion Research Center confirmed contact information and invited 1,295 eligible congregations to participate. The majority, 811 congregations, agreed to administer surveys of all their worshippers during the weekend of April 29 2001. Four-hundred-thirty-one congregations returned attendee surveys, 417 congregations returned congregational profile surveys, and 402 congregations completed both surveys.[3] While the sampling method for the CLS and the NCS are similar, the CLS collected much more information within each congregation.

The CLS consists of three separate surveys conducted in a sample of congregations designed to be nationally representative and in oversamples of congregations from several Christian denominations. First, an attendee survey was administered in each participating congregation to all adults present in worship services during the weekend of April 29 2001 (two weeks after Easter weekend). A randomly divided ten percent of the attendee survey questionnaires in the national sample contains one of ten topical sections rather the common set of back-page questions. One such topical section, completed by 1% of respondents, contains questions about gender attitudes, the family, and the religious socialization of children. Second, a key informant in each congregation

[3] One factor that lowered the response rate was that the delivery company contracted to pick up the surveys during the week following the survey administration actually attempted to pick up the surveys the week prior to the survey administration. Despite the efforts of the research team to correct this problem, some congregations returned surveys before they could be completed.

completed a congregational profile survey. Third, the primary religious leader from each congregation completed a pastor survey.

The CLS random sample attendee survey data set contains information on the beliefs, behaviors, attitudes, and demographic characteristics of 122,404 respondents. Also, eight denominations ran parallel surveys in oversamples from their respective churches: Church of the Nazarene, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Roman Catholic Church, Seventh-day Adventist Church, Southern Baptist Convention, United Methodist Church, and the United Church of Christ (Woolever and Bruce 2002).

List-wise deletion is used to drop individual cases missing core variables: age, marital status, fertility, gender, education, and congregational involvement. Values are imputed for those missing income data based on values for education, age, and marital status.

The CLS is the only data set with information from attendees worshipping in a large national sample of congregations. Conventional surveys typically find that about 40 percent of Americans claim to have attended worship services in the last week. However, many scholars contend this figure is exaggerated, perhaps even double the actual figure (Hadaway and Marler 2005; Hadaway, Marler, and Chaves 1998; Smith 1998). Respondents may wish to present themselves as the type of person who would attend worship services because they perceive churchgoing as socially desirable or they may mentally telescope the "last week" period to encompass their last worship experience. The CLS does not suffer from these biases. Respondents in the CLS are included because they are "caught" attending a worship service. Because of its unique design, the CLS is conductive to multilevel analysis of the relationships between individuals and the congregations that they attend. The CLS samples allow analysis of the influence of theology, pastor, denomination, geography, and exposure to a particular congregation.

**Data Considerations**

There are many advantages of the CLS compared with other data sets. For example, concerning Catholics, it is likely that great differences exist between those who have a latent Catholic identity and those who are active, worshipping Catholics. Previous research has established that prior Catholic fertility patterns should have produced large growth in the Catholic population. However, there has been much apostasy as many who grew up in a Catholic family either no longer identify as Catholic or if they do, they are nonetheless inactive Catholics. The potentially large number of inactive Catholics could suppress a significant Catholic fertility boom. However, unless surveys ask about attendance in a manner likely to produce reliable estimates, fertility of active Catholics may be significantly underestimated.

This data allows unique analysis of an influential core population—those who do attend various congregations. The data allows me to compare, within and among congregations, one cohort's completed fertility and the fertility of the current cohort of women of childbearing age.

## Measures

Among data sources with information on individual level religion and fertility, most have desirable measures for one subject and limited measures of the other. In this case, the CLS has good religion measures and limited fertility data. All respondents were asked, "How many children of any age do you have, whether they live at home or elsewhere?" Although this question does not provide specific information about children who died young or were adopted, it serves as a crude measure of the children ever born to women. For male respondents it measures, perhaps less reliably, the number of children they have sired. This fertility measure is less detailed than those used in formal demographic surveys are but it is more comprehensive than the "own children" measure in many social surveys, which simply measures the number of the respondent's children who are living in the household. Since the CLS does not collect data on recent fertility, it is not suitable for estimating period Total Fertility Rate (TFR). Compared with period TFR, measures of completed (and nearly complete) cohort fertility are more robust to changing tempo of childbearing.[4] Most analyses of religion and fertility are plagued with significant data limitations like reliance on own fertility measures, small sample sizes or limited religion data (Hout 2003). The CLS does not have these limitations.

[4] Analysis of cohort fertility data comparing the U.S. and Europe reveals that their respective fertility levels are closer than period TFR estimates would suggest (Frejka and Westoff 2006).

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