

The Impact of Religious Identification on Differences in Educational Attainment Among American Women in 1990*

ARIELA KEYSAR†
BARRY A. KOSMIN†

This study demonstrates that religion is significantly associated with the acquisition of postsecondary education by white women in the contemporary United States. Religion has both direct and indirect effects on educational attainment. Religious traditions differ in the degree to which they emphasize the importance of the family, marriage, and child bearing. This, in turn, influences how much higher education the women of the group are likely to obtain. Thus, religion has an indirect effect on the educational levels of women through their demographic behavior. In addition, we show that there is a relationship between religion and the education of white women that is maintained beyond other sociodemographic factors. A refined model involving 12 religious identifications on a conservative-liberal continuum, subjected to multivariate analyses, illustrates that educational differences tend to be wider among older women. Surprisingly, Conservative Protestant and No Religion adherents do not form the polarities, but have similar middle-order levels of educational attainment.

INTRODUCTION

Education is the main vehicle for status attainment in modern societies (Sorokin 1927); thus, variations in educational achievement among women have crucial socioeconomic consequences for women as well as families and communities. We aim to explore the impact of religious identification on the educational attainment of American women in 1990. We assess the influence of religion on educational achievement by comparing women across twelve religious groups, focusing on white non-Hispanic women in order to control for social variables associated with race.

The sociological literature dealing with gender has treated the socioeconomic dependence of women upon marriage, kin, and husbands as one of the hallmarks of traditionalism. Religion is widely recognized as important in creating cultural communities, which in turn directly influence their adherents' attitudes and behavior toward gender roles in society. Unfortunately, from a research point of view, the religious composition of the population has largely been absent from official national data collections in most countries during recent decades, especially in the U.S. Census. As a result, religious identity, unlike religiosity, has

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Raleigh, NC, November 1993. The authors are grateful to David Rindskopf for his statistical advice and to Debbie Aiash for her computer assistance.

† Ariela Keysar is Research Fellow at the Berman Institute, CUNY Graduate Center, 33 W. 42nd St., New York, NY 10036.

† Barry A. Kosmin is on the doctoral faculty in sociology and is Director of the Berman Institute, CUNY Graduate Center, 33 W. 42nd St., New York, NY 10036.

been generally missing in research that explores determinants of social status and behaviors.

THE HYPOTHESIS

The objective of our study is to test the hypothesis that religion is significantly associated with the acquisition of postsecondary education of women, even in modern societies such as the contemporary United States. In recent decades, political pressure has enhanced women's educational levels and encouraged gender equality in education. Moreover, state policy initiatives have produced increases in overall U.S. high school graduation rates. Nevertheless, individual religious groups differ in the levels of higher education that their adherents attain in the order of 300% (Kosmin, Keysar, and Lerer 1992).

We will demonstrate that religion has both a direct and an indirect effect on the educational attainment of women. Religion is the "carrier" of a normative system. Religious traditions differ in the degree to which they emphasize the importance of the family, marriage, and child bearing. This emphasis, in turn, influences how much higher education the women of the group are likely to obtain. Thus we argue that religion has an indirect effect on the educational levels of women through their demographic behavior. As for the direct effect, we assume that high educational levels of women are negatively associated with religious traditionalism. Thus, low educational attainment of women is likely to be related to conservative religious beliefs, which perpetuate traditional gender roles. We claim that the relationship between religion and the education of women is maintained even beyond other social and demographic factors. Obviously, several competing forces might influence these variables and thereby interact to affect the position of women in society. Overall, we believe that modern sex role values associated with liberal rather traditional groups encourage women to study into their adult years, other things being equal.

The United States features unique social phenomena with two apparently conflicting streams: a relatively religious population living in an advanced postindustrial economy (Kosmin and Lachman 1993). As a result of these cross-cutting secularizing and religious trends in the United States, we should expect to find considerable variation on gender issues among Americans according to the religious bodies with which they identify. Both religious traditionalist and secular modernist tendencies should be stronger than in other societies. So the variation among Americans should range quite widely according to particular religious outlooks. Therefore, we explain and illustrate this phenomenon by using a refined model involving 12 religious identifications on a continuum rather than a crude binary conservative-liberal classification.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Religion and Gender Roles

The role of religious institutions in maintaining traditional gender role perspectives — and thereby the socioeconomic dependence of women — has been documented in the literature (Daly 1985; DiSalvo 1984; Brinkerhoff and MacKie 1984; D'Antonio and Aldous 1983). Certain religions endorse, and thus perpetuate, the traditional family division of labor that distinguishes male and female roles. The domestic role is assigned to women, and the provider role is prescribed for men. A religion with this patriarchal outlook contributes to the continued economic dependence of women (Wilson 1982). As the traditional German expression maintains, the domain of women is "*Kinder, Küche, und Kirche*" — children, the kitchen, and church.

In keeping with such ideas, Heaton and Cornwall (1989) argue that "an important factor to the relative socioeconomic status of women within any social group or culture is the extent to which the domestic sphere is defined as women's domain." With greater emphasis on domestic roles for women, women are less likely to be encouraged to increase their education (or develop a career). Moreover, marriage and childbearing are competing for a woman's time, drawing her away from nondomestic roles. Religious prescriptions about the importance of the family, and particularly about women's primary role in childbearing and child rearing, may explain much of the variation between religious groups.

In recent decades, as women have moved out of the home and joined the labor force, the economic roles of women have changed tremendously. The demographic consequences have been felt both on marriage and household formation and on childbearing patterns. At the same time, female economic activity has changed marital decision making and the household division of labor and, to some extent, has reconstituted sex-role attitudes (Waite 1981). Both demographic shifts and economic needs for female labor force participation opened new career and educational opportunities for women. These new options outside the domestic sphere usually conflict with traditional and less egalitarian ideologies of gender differences.

Studies on the relationship between religion and fertility in the United States have shown that marriage patterns differ by religion (Mosher, Johnson, and Horn 1986). A recent study revealed the pattern of Catholics to marry later and less often, the low fertility of Jewish women and those with no religious affiliation, and the high fertility of Mormon women (Mosher, Williams, and Johnson 1992).

The Liberal-Conservative Continuum Among Religious Groups

In contemporary America a simple comparison of Protestants and Catholics is often misleading and can produce inconclusive results in demographic studies — for example, in Liao's study (1992) on fertility patterns. The diversity of opinion and practice within the various Protestant denominations, which comprise almost 60% of the U.S. population, has increased in recent decades (Kosmin and Lachman 1993). Therefore, research in this area has to differentiate among Protestants between the more liberal mainline denominations and the more conservative or traditional groups. Thus, in recent years various scholars have developed a typology of America's religious groups according to a line of liberal-conservative typification.

Contemporary scholars of American religion have developed a fine delineation of denominational families which relates to their theological outlook and concomitant social outlook (Roof and McKinney 1987; Wuthnow 1988). This has amplified the work of Greeley (1972), who, following Glock and Stark (1965), posited a four-tiered typology of the new denominationalism. The first tier, the *liberals*, is made up of the Congregationalists, the Methodists and the Episcopalians, whose members have tended to place less emphasis on firm belief in the central tenets of Christian orthodoxy. The second tier, the *moderate* group, includes the Disciples of Christ and the Presbyterians. This group is less secularized than the liberals but more so than the third tier, the *conservatives*, which is made up of the main body of Lutherans and the American Baptists. The fourth tier is the *fundamentalists* — the Southern Baptists, and the Missouri Synod Lutherans, and the small Protestant sects. The Catholics, representing another group, are linked with the conservatives.

A more recent typology of American religion in the postaquarian age (Perrin 1989) classifies the denominations as following: *conservative churches* — Baptist, Pentecostals (Assembly of God and Church of God), Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormon, Churches of Christ, Nazarene and Seventh Day Adventist; *moderate churches* — Lutheran, Disciples of Christ, and Catholic; *liberal churches* — Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, and United Church

of Christ. Note that Perrin placed Lutherans among the moderate churches, while Glock and Stark placed Lutherans among the conservatives. In addition, Presbyterians are considered liberals according to Perrin's study (1989), unlike their older classification as a moderate church. Unitarian-Universalists and the adherents of Eastern and New Religions movements are placed at the extreme liberal end of the continuum close to the secularized "No Religion" category.

Among the religious groups discussed here with regard to the advancement in the status of women, the liberal, world-affirming wing is comprised of the "mainline" Protestant denominations, such as the Protestant Episcopal Church, American Baptist Churches, Presbyterian Church (USA), and the majority Reform and Conservative branches of American Judaism. These denominations historically have had social prestige and societal influence out of proportion to their actual number of adherents. The religious middle ground is inhabited by the moderate Protestant denominations, such as the main bodies of Lutherans and Methodists and perhaps the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox Jews. On the conservative wing are found the larger Baptist bodies, the mainly white Southern Baptist Convention and the African-American National Baptist Convention. Even more conservative are the Pentecostal groups as well as such Protestant denominations as the Churches of Christ, the Church of the Nazarene, and the Mormons (the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints).

The conservative religious bodies tend to be fundamentalists who do not accept modern reinterpretation of Scripture. They assert the inerrancy, or literal truth, of the Bible, and so must hold to some antifeminist attitudes. The subordinate status of women and their roles as helpmate and mother are clearly set out in the Book of Genesis. This status is restated for some roles in the New Testament (Ephesians 5:22-24 and I Timothy 2:12). Fundamentalists, many evangelical Protestants, the Roman Catholic Church, and (in most contexts) Orthodox Jews uphold the biblical injunction to "be fruitful and multiply." Such ideas usually militate against higher educational opportunities for young adult women.

Of course, there can be a gap between official teachings and the outlook and actual behavior of many adherents (Greeley 1977). However, of more relevance to this study is the linkage and high correlation between religious traditionalism and religious commitment (Glock and Stark 1965), one manifestation of which is the high membership rates among identifiers with conservative groups, discussed below.

THE DATA

The primary source of data used in our analysis is the CUNY Graduate Center's National Survey of Religious Identification (NSRI) conducted by ICR Survey Research Group of Media, Pennsylvania, during the period April 1989 - April 1990. The NSRI used ICR's twice-weekly EXCEL omnibus telephone survey, a random-digit-dialed (RDD) representative sample of the 48 contiguous states of the Continental United States. The procedure employed the GENESYS sampling system, which uses a single-stage sample of telephone numbers within known residential working banks. Telephone exchanges are strictly ordered by Census geographic variables (i.e., Division, Metro/Non-Metro, Central Way/Suburban, and so on), creating a sample frame with fine implicit geographic stratification. It involved asking 113,000 adult household respondents, chosen by using the last birthday method, "What is your religion?" Respondents' self reports formed the basis of the religious identity data. The only follow-up question, directed to those who answered "Protestant," was

"Which denomination?"¹ Following this, additional questions on various socioeconomic variables were asked, replicating items from the U.S. Census. Overall, the refusal rate for the religious identity question was 2.3%. Each EXCEL was poststratified and weighted to be representative of the U.S. adult population. The total sample assessed for this analysis included 19,274 women aged 18-45 years old in 12 religious groups. The largest group is the Catholics, with 6,933 respondents, and the smallest is the Liberal and Eastern Religions category — composed of Unitarian-Universalists, New Age, Agnostic, Buddhist, Hindu, and Ba'hai adherents — with 262 respondents.

It is important to state at the outset that the respondents provided a "religious identification" or allegiance. They do not necessarily hold current membership in their preferred religious group. Additionally, respondents in most cases answered by providing a "denominational family," such as Lutheran, Baptist, or Jewish, rather than a specific branch of these faiths. This means that in this data set the minority American Baptists are subsumed within the conservative Southern Baptist majority. Likewise, the conservative Missouri Synod Lutherans are subsumed among the more moderate majority of Evangelical Lutherans and the small minority of Orthodox Jews are placed within the same category as the liberal Reform and Conservative majority of American Jews. The process of self-identification means that the 12 religious group categories we use include people described as "unaffiliated," "unchurched," or "nominals" in varying proportions. Obviously, there are differential affiliation rates across the religious groups, with the traditionalists being more religiously committed and thus more likely to be "churched" than those identifying with liberal groups. NSRI findings for the evangelical conservative Church of the Nazarene equated almost exactly with the current adult membership rolls of this denomination. On the other hand, NSRI found almost three identifiers for every registered adherent of the liberal Unitarian-Universalist Association and a ratio of more than 2:1 for Episcopalians (Kosmin and Lachman 1993).

The various groups are a broad cross-section of their denominational constituency or religious tradition. Thus, presumably the contrasts among the 12 religious groups, which reflect the outlook and beliefs of our respondents, will be less differentiated and more valid than a comparison confined only to active members. Therefore, the findings of this study are of considerable social consequence because they represent a larger constituency based upon self-identification rather than just current institutional membership. The large national sample allows for inclusion of several smaller, heretofore largely unresearched, American religious groups. Further, the inclusion of several groups of the religious traditionalists is particularly crucial for the study of social attainment and gender. The need for a refined classification of religious groups will be demonstrated primarily for Protestants, who are very diverse demographically and culturally even within the white population.

METHODOLOGY

The analysis is carried out in three stages. The first stage consists of a descriptive analysis of the percentage of women continuing their education beyond high school graduation for 12 religious identification groups (Table 1). The second part is an exploratory model that assesses the predictors of religious identification on the education of women, controlling for demographic variables and checking for interactions by means of logistic regressions. The

1. The NSRI relies on unprompted self-reporting of religious identification, and thus differs from the frequently used General Social Survey (NORC). The GSS asks a leading question: "What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion?" If the answer is Protestant, then the respondent is further asked "What specific denomination is that, if any?" and the interviewer is instructed to probe for the exact denomination.

third stage consists of a causal model. This analysis evaluates the effects, both direct and indirect, of religion on education by means of path analyses. The path diagram presents a picture of the relationships that are assumed to hold in each model. At each stage a comparison is made between two age cohorts: women aged 18-24 years and those aged 25-44 years.

The Variables for the Multivariate Models:

The following six variables are used in the analyses:

- A) Educational Attainment — A continuous variable: 1) less than high school graduate; 2) high school graduate; 3) some college; 4) college graduate; 5) post-graduate degree;²
- B) Religious Traditionalism: each religious group was placed in a hierarchy according to its approximate place on the four tiers of traditionalism as suggested by the literature review above:
 - 1) Conservative Protestant; 2) Pentecostal; 3) Baptist; 4) Mormon; 5) Lutheran; 6) Catholic; 7) Methodist; 8) Presbyterian; 9) Episcopalian; 10) Jewish; 11) Liberal/Eastern; 12) No Religion;
- C) Age of the Woman: a continuous variable;
- D) Marital Status of the Woman: a dichotomous variable — 0) single, divorced and widowed (only for women 25-44); 1) married;
- E) Having Children: a dichotomous variable — 1) household contains children under age 6 (for women 18-24), or household contains children under age 18 (for women 25-44); 0) no children in the household. This last variable is a proxy for a measure of biological children given the nature of the NSRI questionnaire;
- F) Census Region: 4 census regions for the logistic regression.

In the path analyses Region is a dichotomous variable of place of residency — 0) West; 1) other regions.³

The analysis was carried out separately for women aged 18-24, and then again for women aged 25-44. The choice of the age range for the younger group reflects common practice in demographic studies as well as our need for adequate sample sizes for our 12 religious groups. We are aware of its limitations in terms of the educational cycle.

RESULTS

Descriptive Analysis

In Table 1 we show the percentage of women who continued their education beyond high school level for the two age groups within each religious group. Overall, we found that 46% of the younger cohort, women aged 18-24, and 50% of the older cohort, women aged 25-44, had embarked upon higher education.

For younger women, some of whom had not yet completed high school, the differential range was 47 percentage points, from 26% among Pentecostals to 73% among Jews. Among the older women the range was larger, 61 percentage points, with the same two groups at

2. The crudeness of this measure is considerable. For a further discussion of the robustness of the analytical models and the consequences of treating ordinal indicators as if they were continuous see Bollen 1989.

3. Since the path model assumptions are violated by categorical indicators, the four-category regional variable in the regression model is defined dichotomously in the path model. Although this violates the multivariable normality assumption, the model still fits well.

either end of the scale: Pentecostals with 23% and Jews with 84%. There is a possibility that this larger gap could be a cohort effect, but we believe that it is more likely that as the life cycle progresses the variation between religious groups at either end of the liberal-continuum scale widens. For instance, for the second-place category at each polarity — the Baptists as compared to the Liberal and Eastern religions — the gap grows from 34 percentage points for the younger cohort to 43 points for the older age cohort. The moderate grouping, the Lutherans, Catholics, and Methodists, are closer to the norms in both cohorts. The only marked shift between the age cohorts occurs for Mormons, who move from below to above the educational levels of the three moderate groups. As a result, this gain of 19 percentage points in the proportion of women entering higher education compares with a gain of only 4 points for the total sample. Again, this could be a cohort effect, although it is possible that Mormon women enter higher education at later than average ages. The Mormon finding can be explained by the relatively small size of the Mormon sample, but other groups with smaller sample sizes show less variation between the age cohorts.

Interestingly, the rank order of the 12 religious groups remains very similar for both age cohorts. However, the theoretical polarities on the liberal-conservative continuum do not operate as expected. The secularized liberal No-Religion category, which we expected to be the most positive for feminism, and the traditional Conservative Protestant category, which we might have expected to be most negative towards women's advancement, actually have similar scores, close to the mean for the younger age cohort. Although the higher education gap between these two groups widens slightly in the expected direction (12%) among the older age cohort, they both remain middle ranking groups. This surprising finding requires further analysis with control mechanisms for confounding factors before any conclusions are drawn.

TABLE 1
PERCENTAGE OF WHITE NON-HISPANIC WOMEN WITH HIGHER EDUCATION
RANKED BY GROUP FOR RELIGIOUS TRADITIONALISM
NSRI 1990

Religious Group	Age 18-24	N	Age 25-44	N
Conservative Protestant*	48	(80)	42	(344)
Pentecostal**	26	(104)	23	(438)
Baptist	31	(667)	34	(2965)
Mormon	42	(87)	61	(430)
Lutheran	48	(242)	48	(1296)
Catholic	49	(1462)	54	(5471)
Methodist	53	(340)	50	(1637)
Presbyterian	55	(101)	67	(604)
Episcopalian	68	(72)	69	(375)
Jewish	73	(90)	84	(332)
Liberal & Eastern Religions***	65	(49)	77	(213)
No Religion	45	(453)	54	(1422)
Total Population	46	(3,747)	50	(15,527)

* Churches of Christ, Nazarene, Wesleyan, Christian Reform, Four-Square Gospel, Covenant, Brethren.

** Pentecostal, Assemblies of God, and Church of God.

*** Unitarian-Universalist, New Age, Agnostic, Buddhist, Hindu, Ba'hai.

Logistic Regression

The results of the multivariate analysis appear in Table 2, in which the logistic regression coefficients and odds ratios for the final models for each of the two age groups are

shown. The dependent variable is dichotomous: 1) at least some college education; 0) high school graduation or less. The final model presented here is the final step of the stepwise method.

Women 18-24. The odds of acquiring higher education for Jewish women are 2.89 times those for the No Religion group. Educational advantages are also quite large for Episcopalian and Liberal and Eastern Religions women (Odds = 2.59 and 2.11 respectively). On the other hand, the odds of continuing education beyond high school for Pentecostal women are 48% (and for Baptists 33%) lower than for the No Religion women. These religious groupings constitute the two polarities of the educational levels whereby the No Religious group serves as the reference category. An earlier analysis using the grand mean as the reference category yielded similar results. Further, the odds of acquiring higher education for rural women are 25% lower than for urban women.

The results in Table 2 indicate that marital status and having children among young women are not statistically significant factors in educational attainment. Interactions between age and marital status were observed.

TABLE 2
LOGISTIC REGRESSION - WOMEN AGED 18-24 and 25-44

Variable	Reference category	Women 18-24		Women 25-44	
		B	Odds ratio	B	Odds ratio
RELIGION of WOMEN					
	No religion				
Conservative Protestant		.3210	1.3785	-.2466	.7814
Pentecostal		-.6487*	.5228	-1.1602***	.3134
Baptist		-.3962**	.6729	-.6779***	.5077
Mormon		.2923	1.3395	-.0884	.9154
Lutheran		.1887	1.2077	-.2070**	.8131
Catholic		.1095	1.1157	-.0218	.9784
Methodist		.3935**	1.4822	-.0755	.9273
Presbyterian		.3534	1.4238	.5779***	1.7822
Episcopalian		.9541***	2.5964	.6164***	1.8523
Jewish		1.0631***	2.8952	1.4836***	4.4090
Liberal & Eastern Religion		.7482*	2.1133	.9923***	2.6975
AGE (continuous)	N.A.	.9128***	2.4912	-.1752***	.8393
RURAL/URBAN	Urban	-.2815***	.7547	-.4034***	.6681
CHILDREN	No children	—	—	-1.1209***	.3260
MARITAL STATUS	Single				
Married		—	—	-.6089***	.5440
Divorced/Separated		—	—	-.6852***	.5040
REGION	West				
Northeast		—	—	-.5395***	.5831
Midwest		—	—	-.3697***	.6909
South		—	—	-.1764*	.8383
AGE by MARITAL STATUS					
Age x Married		-.6316***	.5318	—	—
Age x Divorced/Separated		-.8776***	.4158	—	—
CONSTANT		-1.7586***		1.1865***	

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

Women 25-44. The odds of acquiring higher education for Jewish women aged 25-44 are 4.41 times those for the No Religion women. Once again, we find a considerable educational advantage for Episcopalian and Liberal and Eastern Religions women. Overall, the odds are similar to those of the younger women; however the Liberal/Eastern religious group

shows a bigger improvement than the Episcopalian. At the same time, the educational odds for Pentecostals are 69% lower than those for the No Religion group, and for Baptists the odds are 50% lower than the reference category. Thus, the gaps between educational levels of the two polarities and the No Religion group seem to widen among women aged 25-44.

While rural/urban residency has a similar effect among both younger and older women, marital status and having children only become important factors among the older women. The odds of acquiring higher education for married or divorced or separated women are 50% lower than those of single women. Moreover, the presence of children reduces the odds of continuing beyond high school education by 68% (compared to women having no children in the family).

Region is also a significant predictor for the older women aged 25-44. The educational advantage of the West is shown by the low levels of the Northeast (odds 42% lower), and of the Midwest (odds 31% lower).

For the sake of simplicity, the interactions that were observed for the older age group are not reported in Table 2. In fact, we found significant two-way interactions between the religious identification of the woman and her place of residency (geographic region) for all groups except Pentecostals, Baptists, and Liberal and Eastern religions. We also observed significant interaction between the age of the woman and the presence of children in the household.

Path Models

Women Aged 18-24. Path analysis distinguishes three types of effects: direct, indirect, and total effects (see Bollen 1989). The direct effect is the influence of one variable on another that is unmediated by any other variables in a path model. The indirect effects of a variable are mediated by at least one intervening variable. The sum of the direct and indirect effects is the total effect. In the path diagram we show the direct and indirect effects of religion on the educational attainment of women. Here we look at the effect of religious traditionalism on the likelihood of acquiring higher education (using a continuous scale of 5 categories, from less than high school up to postgraduate degree) among young women aged 18-24. The direct effect is negative, yet the path coefficient is rather small, the standardized coefficient: $\beta = -.082$.⁴ We find a somewhat stronger relative effect of religious traditionalism on the marital status of young women ($\beta = .118$); the more traditional women tend to marry earlier. This leads us to believe that beyond the direct effect, religious traditionalism also affects educational levels of young women via their marital status. The strong direct effect of marital status on educational levels further supports this claim ($\beta = -.240$). Again, married young women have lower educational levels compared with single women within the same age group.

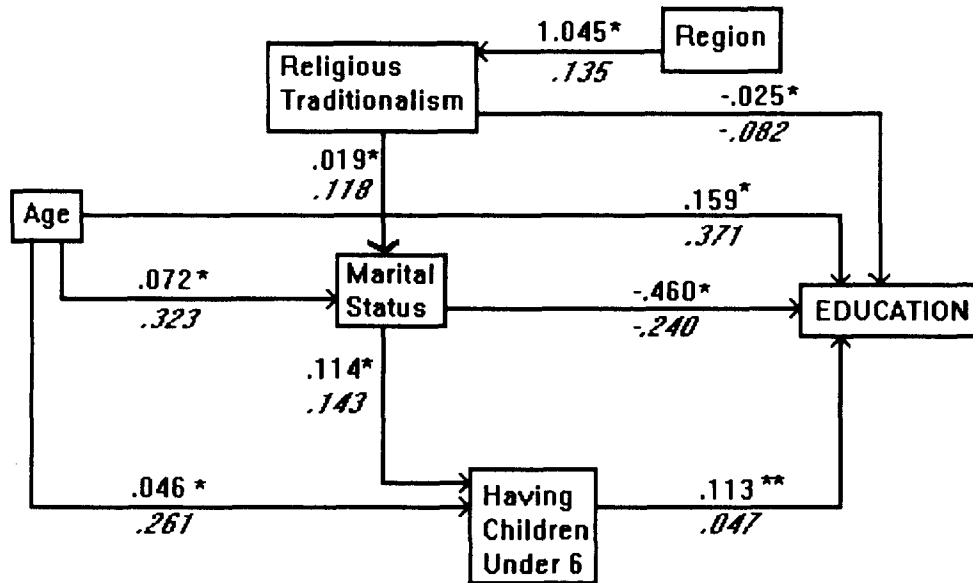
Moreover, there is no significant direct effect of religious traditionalism on having children under age 6; therefore, we dropped its direct path from the modified model. We believe that the important demographic variable in this causal model is the marital status of young women: Traditional women tend to marry earlier. Thus religious traditionalism has an indirect effect on education of women via marital status. This indirect effect is the product of the path coefficients, namely $(.118) * (-.240) = -.028$. As expected, it is not a strong effect (it is calculated by the multiplication of two fractions).

4. The standardized coefficient shows the mean response in standard deviation units of the dependent variable for one standard deviation change in an explanatory variable, holding constant the other variables in a model. Thus, we compare the shift in standard deviation units of the dependent variable that accompanies shifts of one deviation in the explanatory variables as a means to assess relative effects (Bollen 1989).

The age variable has the strongest effect of all the variables in the model, as might be expected for this young adult age group, some of whom may just be completing high school and may not have had time to exercise the option of higher education.

In the modified model, presented in Chart 1, we dropped the direct path of region on education, due to its statistical insignificance. However, we find that region has a significant effect on religious traditionalism.

CHART 1
WHITE WOMEN AGED 18 to 24



*Significant at the 0.001 level **Significant at the 0.005 level
Beta

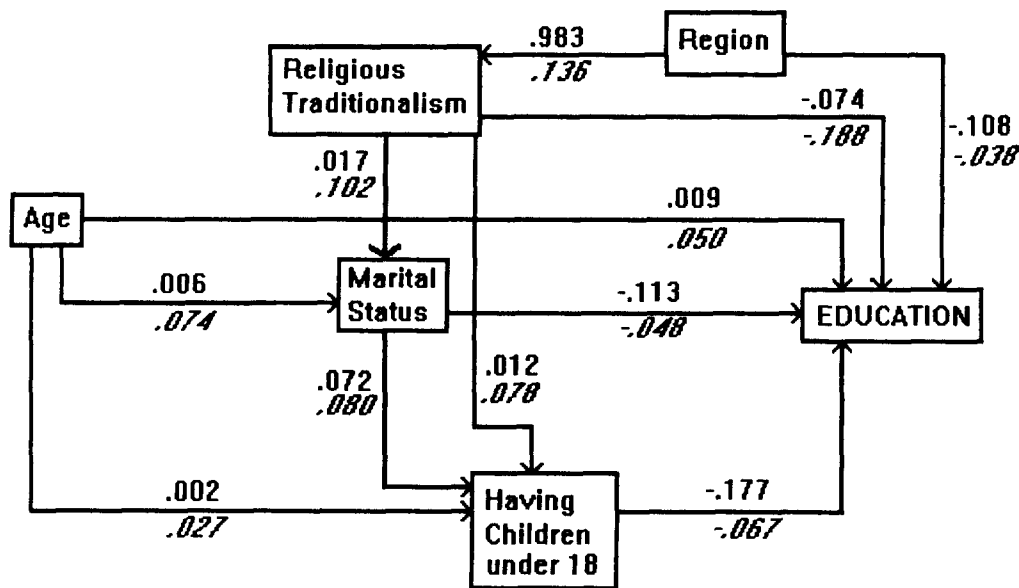
Women Aged 25-44. A similar path model is presented in Chart 2 for women aged 25-44 years with one exception; we are looking at the effect of the factor "having children under age 18" on acquiring higher education.

In this larger age cohort, the age effect on education declines considerably, while the impact of religious traditionalism on the educational level of this older age group is quite noticeable. First, we find a larger direct effect of religion on education (beta = -.188). Second, religious traditionalism also affects the demographic behavior of these women, both their marital status and reproductive patterns (here measured by the number of children under 18 in the household).

If we wish to compare the importance of the religious factor on educational attainment between the two age groups, we ought to look at the differences in the unstandardized coeffi-

cients (B).⁵ Indeed we find a considerable difference whereby the impact of religious traditionalism is stronger among the older age group (B = -.074 for women aged 25-44, compared with B = -.025 for the younger women).

CHART 2
WHITE WOMEN AGED 25 to 44



All variables are significant at the 0.001 level
Beta

Unlike for the younger age group, all the variables in the path model are statistically significant at the 0.001 level for women aged 25-44. In both models we find a significant effect of the region of residency on the religious factor. In fact, the B coefficients are quite similar. Religious traditionalism is less likely to be found in the West. Thus region, which has a small direct effect on education of women only among the older age group, indirectly influences educational attainment of all women through their religious beliefs and attitudes.

5. In general, comparisons of a variable's influence across different groups should be made with unstandardized coefficients. One could find differences in standardized coefficients solely because the sample-implied standard deviations differ for two groups, despite the fact that the unstandardized coefficients are identical (Bollen 1989).

Goodness of Fit

Table 3 demonstrates that the overall goodness of fit measures show a very good match of the data to the model. The chi-square values are low with relatively high probability values, indicating that both models (for women 18-24 and 25-44) fit well.⁶

TABLE 3
THE MEASURES OF OVERALL MODEL FIT OF THE PATH ANALYSES

Summary Fit Measure	Women 18-24	Women 25-44
CHI-SQUARE	9.849*	3.545*
Degrees of Freedom	5	3
Probability	0.080	0.315

*significant at the 0.05 level

DISCUSSION

In contemporary societies, tertiary-level education opens up lifestyle options for women. American women now have more social and economic opportunities and they are making more choices regarding family and career. Indeed, our data showed that there are differences in the impact of the religion on educational levels between young and older women — in our case, between women aged 18-24 and women aged 25-44. Among the younger age group, religion is strongly associated with demographic variables such as getting married early and having children. In contrast, among women aged 25-44 we found a stronger direct effect of religious traditionalism on educational attainment.

This finding directs us to conclude that religious identification plays a more significant role as a cultural factor as people get older. It creates a sorting process that itself is influenced by the acquisition of higher education. We are aware of religious switching, yet our interest is in social status switching. The religious identification of women aged 18-24 typically is a product of their religious background and their family and household of origin. In contrast, for women aged 25-44 religious identification is more likely to reflect their own personal religious beliefs. Moreover, older women's achievements are a consequence of their own choices and decision making, rather than family and religious origins. An alternative reasoning for explaining the age group variations might support secularization theory in terms of institutional adjustment. For example, young women who grew up in the Church of Christ of the 1970s and 1980s were probably socialized into a very different and more modernized church than were older women who grew up in the Church of Christ of the 1950s and 1960s.

A different but interesting finding is that the No Religion women are very similar in their educational attainment to average white women. We found no significant differences between that which used No Religion as a reference category and that which used the grand mean as the reference category. More surprising are the close similarities between the findings for the No Religion and those for the Conservative Protestant women. In the case of the No Religion group we believe that this secularized group represents a middle range educational group among white American women today. This apparent anomaly might be explained by the fact that the No Religion category is the respondent's current identification, and many are apostates and may indeed have been raised and socialized into a traditional religious group. However, it is impossible to assess whether there is a disproportionate num-

6. One should be careful comparing the two models because of their different sample sizes.

ber of ex-conservative women in the No Religion category. Theoretically, the No Religion category is an amorphous aggregate rather than a religious group, yet operationally it has some group characteristics in the context of religious identification and secularization processes (Mosher and Hendershot 1984).

More generally, our study has aimed at linking various types of religious identification to the educational attainment of American women in 1990. Participation in higher education is important in regard to gender equality in contemporary societies. We found that differences between religious groups in female education attainment attributable to religion for both the younger and older cohorts of women.

We believe that this research provides some insights into class formation with relation to religious identification. However, it is difficult to disentangle education from other aspects of class attributes, especially for married women, for whom the overall household characteristics may not accurately reflect personal status. Such detailed information is hard to collect in a large national sample like NSRI. Thus, in order to avoid confusion between ascribed and achieved status in postsecondary-education, we chose to focus on social and demographic variables in our analysis and relate them to religion and education.

This research suggests that religious identification should not be ignored in examining social processes in developed societies. There is growing social polarization in developed societies between conservative and liberal outlooks, and our data (Table 1) endorse the liberal-conservative hierarchy of religious groups suggested in the current literature. The conflict between the traditional and progressive, or fundamentalist and modern forces, is particularly striking over family and women's issues. The organizing principle for the two approaches to contemporary social issues is often related to religious attitudes and values. Our U.S. data indicate that some gender inequality is indeed socially created by the influence of religion. Religion influences women in religious groups such as Pentecostals by its tendency to reduce female adherents' occupational roles by lowering their opportunities to attain higher education. Potential time for study and work outside the home is replaced by domestic labor, marriage, and childbearing, by motherhood and family duties. These competing alternative claims on women's time are particularly clear in the creation of a continuum or a series of clusters among the religious groups.

Jewish women are outliers at the liberal end of the religious continuum. Moreover, our results show that the older cohort of Jewish women exhibited an even stronger tendency toward higher educational achievement. Evidence shows that religious switching is related to educational attainment: The findings of the 1990 National Population Survey show that 90% of female Jews by choice (converts) have attained some higher education, whereas among apostates from Judaism only 56% have higher education (Kosmin et al. 1991; Goldstein 1993). Obviously, such social processes of recruitment, retention, and loss of women by the various religious groups produce some of the changes and the dynamics that we have observed. This finding suggests the need for longitudinal studies in order to further explain causality in the study of the role of religion in the educational attainment of women.

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