

New Men

W. Bradford Wilcox, *Soft Patriarchs, New Men: How Christianity Shapes Fathers and Husbands* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), 328 pages

Reviewed by Benjamin Petty

The author, an eminent sociologist in the field of marriage and family studies, is director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia where he teaches. In this work, he takes up the task of responding to current sociological perspectives which either cast religion as a reactionary anchor (keeping the modern family from reaching a promised egalitarian bliss), or an ultimately irrelevant factor in the face of the inexorable evolutionary force of political and economic realities.

Men are the focus of this investigation because the data shows that, though women have made significant strides in closing the employment and education gap, they are still doing a majority of the housework as well. The revolution of the 60s and 70s has stalled, and it requires a change in male behavior to supply the spark necessary to get it going again. Since there has been a conservative protestant focus on men taking leadership in their families (e.g. the Promise Keeper movement of the mid-90s), conservative Protestantism has been blamed as a major cause of the stall, and therefore as dangerous to families.

Wilcox's hypothesis is that religion, and specifically conservative Protestantism, not only continues to have a significant effect on the family behavior and attitudes of the men who practice it, but is actually linked to remarkably stronger performance in key areas that predict positive outcomes for the well-being of family members.

In order to test his hypothesis, Wilcox first lays out the distinctive responses that mainline and conservative Protestant churches developed in response to mid-twentieth century cultural shifts in marriage and family practice. He characterizes the mainline denominations' largely accommodationist stance as "Golden Rule liberalism" – the institutional embrace of an inclusive notion of family based on an egalitarian caring ethic – and the conservatives' largely resistant stance as "expressive traditionalism," valorizing the traditional family while embracing certain new therapeutic developments. He sees the conservative Protestant response not as a hunkering down but as an active engagement, and as a source of unparalleled religious vitality. For all the distinctiveness of their responses, Wilcox shows through a close reading of secondary literature, that both sides adopted a therapeutic ethic of personal psychological wellness.

But does the institutional emphasis translate into individual adherence? Wilcox's analysis of the attitudes of individuals within those different traditions reveals ambivalence between the institutional stance and individual belief within each denomination, but conservative Protestant affiliation ends up being the most consistent predictor of gender traditionalism and familism. Coming to the heart of the matter, Wilcox examines what effect, if any, the persistence of these traits within conservative Protestantism has on the behavior of married men with children. He examines the areas of parenting, household labor, and spousal satisfaction.

His analysis of parenting practices shows that active religious men and conservative Protestant men have the highest involvement in their children's lives, and authoritative (linked to healthy outcomes for children) but not authoritarian (linked to negative outcomes) styles of parenting. They are, in short, better than average parents in statistically significant ways for being religious and conservative Protestants. Wilcox distinguishes between the way that mainline and conservative Protestant men perform these roles; the mainline men are new men, who are more egalitarian in their labor and beliefs, while conservatives are the soft patriarchs of the book's title: traditionally minded, but active servant-leaders.

Perhaps the most intriguing parts of this book are the two chapters on household labor division and spousal satisfaction. The data shows that the revolution has really stalled in terms of an egalitarian division of labor, with conservative Protestant men doing the least amount of housework compared to their wives. However, this is coupled with those same overworked wives reporting the highest level of spousal appreciation. In order to explain this link better, Wilcox makes use of the concept of the "economy of gratitude." Feeling appreciated, and being shown concrete acts of appreciation, are more consistent predictors of marital health than equal workload or income.

Wilcox's analysis shows that religion does have a significant and positive effect on the behavior of married men with children according to current criteria. He has demonstrated that the assertion that conservative Protestant men are harming the emotional health of children and women is not supported by any quantifiable criteria. In reality, the facts reveal that those same men, whom certain scholars have labeled as the enemy of the new family, are in fact the best at bringing it about.

This demonstration is both the greatest strength and weakness of this well-constructed and carefully argued book. As a sociologist who is an advocate for a minority perspective within the culture, he confines himself strictly to the style of an article in a journal of sociology. His chapters are each organized around a testable hypothesis derived from current debates within his field. This can frustrate a reader who may be unfamiliar with

that style because the import of his findings is so modestly displayed. However, those with a background in sociology will find his method sound, and ample data to explore in the appendices. If there is any bone to be picked with his methods it is his dependence on the General Social Survey, conducted in 1987–8. In the sixteen years that have lapsed between that survey and the publication of this book, cultural attitudes on gender equality and family roles have continued to liberalize. In addition, economic trends have continued to push both parents to work outside the home. Without more recent data, some may argue that those cultural pressures may have weakened conservative Protestants' attitudes and practices since the 1980s.

However, the book's limited sociological style is simultaneously its greatest weakness. By strictly confining himself, Wilcox can rely only on empirical criteria established by the majority of sociologists to evaluate family health. Perhaps, in an indirect way, his refutation of certain majority perspectives calls into question their broader assumptions, but Wilcox refrains from explicitly taking them to task. He includes discussion of some work already done in the understanding of economies of gratitude, which helps to explain the surprising discrepancy between inequitable household labor division and greater satisfaction of wives with their active conservative Protestant husbands. But important questions remain to be answered. Do the new therapeutic criteria, with their emphasis on individual psychological well-being, instrumentalize the family in a way that makes it a tool for personal fulfillment? What is an adequate measure of family health? How does one best define equality within a traditional understanding of gender difference?

Readers will find openings to these discussions in Wilcox's findings and conclusions, but few firm assertions that genuinely transcend the bounds of sociology. The limits of this format do not preclude Wilcox from someday writing a less doggedly scientific work that might synthesize the data with a broader, more philosophical reflection on the intimate relation between church and family in America. But, until Wilcox writes this book, readers will have to content themselves with this more rigid and focused work.

In the end, Wilcox has, by a careful application of statistical analysis, refuted certain elements of current sociological theory that downplay or vilify the effect that religion in general and conservative Protestantism in particular has on husbands and fathers. It is a valuable resource to anyone who has asked themselves if religion really makes a difference in people's lives, and provides a solid empirical basis for thinking so – one that demands a deeper philosophical explanation.

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