

CULTURE *Q&A*

Marriage's fragile future

Changing attitudes, even among young Christians, propel disturbing trends

by [Marvin Olasky](#)

Post Date: September 10, 2020 - Issue Date: September 26, 2020



(Illustration by Jeffrey J. Smith)

Mark Regnerus graduated from Trinity Christian College in 1993 and gained his Ph.D. at the University of North Carolina in 2000. He is now a courageous sociology professor at the University of Texas at Austin and the author of Oxford University Press books on sex and marriage with a Biblical base and lively titles like *Forbidden Fruit* and *Cheap Sex*.

You married at 22. You write in your new book, *The Future of Christian Marriage*, “After a couple of years, I gave some thoughts to leaving. I’m grateful I didn’t hit the eject button on my marriage, in no small part because I didn’t know how.” What does that mean? I was a smart fellow and could look things up, but I didn’t have family examples to follow: No divorces in our immediate families. That, combined with the idea that this would be a heartbreak for my parents and her parents, led me to hang in there. We worked at things, got help, and eventually it improved. I have zero thoughts of ever escaping. It’s been very good for me and I think for her.

Three children now? A college senior, a college junior, and an 11-year-old.

You became an assistant professor in 2002 and an associate professor in 2007, on schedule to gain a full professor appointment in fall 2012—but in the summer an academic journal published your article on negative effects among children when their parents had been in same-sex relationships. The result: an academic lynching. That’s an accurate description.

What in your research drove opponents bananas? My article in *Social Science Research* drew upon a random sample, the largest of its kind at the time, of 18- to 39-year-olds with a mother or father who had been in a same-sex relationship at some point while they were growing up. I asked about their childhoods and their current situations. We found statistically that those kids fared significantly worse on average than kids who grew up with parents still married. My life changed when the article was published: for three solid years, online harassment. Never in person. I’m grateful for that.

More than 200 scholars and researchers signed a letter protesting that you did this terrible thing—finding the kids weren’t all right. The only criticism that made sense to me was that you didn’t control for household instability. That’s true, and I talked about why I didn’t—partly because there was no way to be in a same-sex household without

experiencing some turmoil. You either were taken from your mother or father, or you were apt to experience upheaval in that household.

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Jim Wright, the editor of the journal that published your study, took a lot of heat. He died last year. He was a very good man, respected by people who liked me and people who loathed me. He didn't deserve the kind of vitriol he got. If I could have taken that off of him, I would have.

Did journal editors become gun-shy? Several years ago I asked an editor who was semi-conservative to moderate about revisiting the subject. He hemmed and hawed and said, "We'd have to do it a little bit differently." You start thinking, "Do I want the grief? I'm just gonna say, No, I'll pass."

When did your online harassment stop? When the Supreme Court announced its *Obergefell* decision.

For same-sex marriage advocates was it "Mission accomplished. Stand down"? It seemed that way.

You didn't become a full professor until 2018. That was a battle. I was up for full in the fall of 2012. Then the article, and it turned into "or next year, or the year after that, or the year after that." Once stigmatized, always stigmatized in this domain. I wasn't willing to say things more palatable to particular interests. But I didn't leave the University of Texas because when I separated all that pressure and antagonism from the rest of what I was doing, I could say, "I like it here. I can do what I want to do here."

The Department of Sociology said no to promotion. Then the College of Liberal Arts dean said no, but the central administration overrode those negative recommendations. The

president of the university discerned that the opposition was political. In Texas it never hurts to have a conservative around institutionally.

The Texas Legislature likes to see several. It's great you're a full professor, but there are other ways of harassing you: assignment for courses, salary, and so on. How is that working out? It's funny because people say, "Oh, you've got tenure," as if that's the only thing and is necessary and sufficient. As you know, there are dozens of ways of bleeding a person. So, I'm not at the high end of the pay scale, but I have no complaints about that. I like to think my colleagues are overpaid and I'm not underpaid.

Colleagues are glad if you skip a committee meeting and aren't there to raise uncomfortable questions. I stick to my research and my teaching.

One writer said the goal of your harassment was to stop the next researcher who might attempt to study gay parenting. The Mafia-style comment would be, "That's a nice little tenure track job you got there, a shame for something to happen to it." What's the level of intimidation in sociology around the U.S.? You don't get a Ph.D. in sociology unless you are on board with some of the grander projects. NIH spends a quarter billion dollars a year on SOGI, sexual orientation/gender identity research. A quarter billion a year! I'm awestruck that we, the taxpayers, are paying for messaging that is thwarting more sensible conclusions.

Still, you're still going, and your new book, *The Future of Christian Marriage*, is based on research in seven countries. Mexico, United States, Spain, Poland, Russia, Lebanon, Nigeria: I wanted to capture some of the span of Christian tradition. I sought out in each of those places a social scientist to oversee the data collection among 25- to 35-year-olds. Then I could visit and reinterview some of them to get a rich perspective on how they think about marriage.

You write that not only in the United States but all over marriage is becoming an elite, voluntary, consumption-oriented institution: You own a car, maybe a house, you have some savings, then you qualify for marriage? It's staggering. We didn't just sell this vision to the American working class. It's as if Americans sold it to the world, and to Christians around the world as well.

In some other countries it's even more commercialized? In some countries a wedding is socially such a big deal that people wind up having to save money and take out loans. Driving down the main highway that goes north out of Beirut into northern Lebanon, I constantly saw billboards about wedding loans, like we get loans to go to college.

You mention marriage's key traits historically, including permanence and fidelity. No-fault divorce ends permanence; the sexual revolution undermines fidelity. How do you combat the decline? Some people want governmental investment in marriage, but that's a dicey suggestion because it's far easier to bust stuff up than to make marriages happen. My colleagues tend to hold that we're seeing a decline in marriage because people want financial security first, or they don't think somebody is a particularly good bet because of their job prospects. But many men lack interest in marrying, or think they don't have to marry because sex is cheap.

Some conservatives propose that we end no-fault divorce. I'm a fan of getting rid of it, but that's not going to happen. More women than men support no-fault divorce because their expectations are higher, and exiting a bad marriage tends to be a higher priority for women than for men.

Cohabitation is growing not only generally but among Christians? It's a minority of Christians, but higher than I would've expected because it's thumbing the nose at the Christian church's vision for what marriage is. They're mimicking husband and wife with a sexual union, but they're not giving all, they're holding back. Fidelity may be there temporarily, but they haven't promised the future to each other. The acceptability of Christian cohabitation prior to marriage is perhaps a greater threat than the long-standing attraction to premarital sex. Cohabitation signals anxiety and uncertainty—which is why I think if you have uncertainty, marry and you solve that uncertainty. But, that's not how people think about this process anymore.

If a Christian student comes to you and says, "I'm in a relationship and thinking of cohabiting. I know what my pastor says about it, but I want to know from you, a professional sociologist, what you say about the data," what do you say? I would ask, *What are you signaling with cohabitation, who's doing the inviting, why not get married?* It's sliding versus deciding: You find yourself at that person's apartment overnight long enough and think, *So far it's worked out OK, I guess I'll just leave an extra set of clothes here.* You're

increasing strings and attachments, even though you don't think you are. You've bought things together, you have a pet, and you think breaking this off is not painful—but it's profoundly painful. You've made commitments and attachments without the proper level of future orientation. You shouldn't be surprised when it collapses and it hurts profoundly.

So you would ask ... *Why do you want to fake like you're married instead of actually getting married? If there are a variety of plausible reasons for faking it, I'd say, Why don't you work on those plausible reasons and find some clarity on them rather than pretending that you're married, in which case you probably will feel married in some ways but with a much more fragile structure.*

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