

New study by sociologist Mark Regnerus suggests religion can predict sexual behavior

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (RNS) Controversial sociologist Mark Regnerus presented new research on marriage and sex at a conference of Southern Baptists on Tuesday (April 22), suggesting that religion and sex are tracking more closely than ever before.

In his first new research since his controversial study on same-sex parenting about two years ago, the sociology professor at the University of Texas at Austin presented findings from an unpublished study on marriage and sexual behavior to the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission conference on sexuality. The study suggests there's a correspondence between what people's religious affiliations proscribe regarding sex and marriage and their behavior.

In his former study, Regnerus, a Catholic who was raised as a Dutch Calvinist, argued that young adults with a parent who had had a same-sex relationship fared worse than those raised by biological parents without histories of same-sex relationships. He addressed criticisms in a follow-up paper in 2012, but he continues to stand by his study.

"The study hasn't been retracted," Regenerus said in an interview. "I can't imagine it being retracted, because it's not false and no errors were discovered. Maybe there could've been a sensitivity to language. But I stand by what I said."

The state of Utah recently filed a letter distancing itself from the study in defending its statewide ban on same-sex marriage. The state cited a recent federal district court decision dismissing Regnerus' views as "not worthy of serious consideration."

In his new study, Regnerus conducted a survey of 5,738 people ages 18 to 39, asking them about behavior from porn use and masturbation to marriage and views on social issues. "Religion and sex are tracking each other like never before," he said in an interview. While the research included those of other faiths, Regnerus' presentation to Baptists focused mostly on Christians.

About 50 percent of younger evangelicals had premarital sex with their spouse, compared to 10 percent of Mormons, his study suggests. Mormons are the least likely religious group to be in a sexually inactive marriage, the research suggests.

He declined to provide his report to reporters saying his research is scheduled to be released in September. His presentation offered at least three possible takeaways:

1. The percent of younger people who are unmarried is going up each year.

Since 2000, the rate of those who are married and between 25 and 35 years old has been going down while the rate of those who have never been married is going up by about 1 percentage point each year. Those who were married used to be a higher percentage than people who were unmarried, but the trend began to reverse around 2008.

"By 2020, this is full-scale disaster for the church and society," Regnerus said in an interview. "Marriage is foundational for civil society. We don't have to have everybody married. But if you can't solve problems in the household, there's a lot more community dependence."

2. Men are in the driver's seat in the marriage market.

Women tend to be more interested in marriage, giving men the upper hand to choose if they want to "settle."

"I don't think men are afraid of commitment at all," Regnerus said in his presentation. "They're in the driver's seat in the marriage corner of the market."

Women are generally more interested in commitments and are more concerned about numerous partners than men. Women's need for an economically stable husband has decreased, but they still want a marriageable partner, he said.

"The question is whether marriage is shrinking with the need," he said.

3. Younger women have more fluid sexual identities than men.

Men say they are heterosexual at a much more consistent rate than women. For instance, women in their 20s are significantly less likely to say they are definitely heterosexual.

Regnerus said that the marriage of Mayor Bill de Blasio, who is married to a former lesbian, illustrates how women are more likely to consider themselves to be heterosexual later in life. On the other hand, men remain more consistent over time, settling earlier on whether or not they are definitely heterosexual.

He also found that same-sex couples have more partners. When he asked, “Have you or your partner ‘had any other sexual partners’ since the relationship began?” 28 percent of cohabiting opposite-sex respondents said yes, compared to 37 percent of cohabiting same-sex respondents.

Despite the earlier controversy, he hopes that in time people come to appreciate his research.

“After all this political hoo-ha is done and gone, we’ll finally be able to settle down and people can talk about the same data with cooler heads,” he said.