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Penny Edgell: Religion and Family in a Changing Society

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Chapter One

CONTESTED CHANGES—“FAMILY VALUES” IN LOCAL RELIGIOUS LIFE

CHANGES IN FAMILY LIFE have transformed our society in the last thirty years. One of the biggest has been the virtual disappearance of the male-breadwinner lifestyle and the emerging dominance of the dual-earner couple. Working wives and mothers face questions about the effects of their choices on their children's welfare and their own health under the strain of the “second shift,” while their husbands confront—and respond to in a variety of ways—new opportunities to construct a masculine identity not focused exclusively on breadwinning. Leaders in education, business, and government debate what policies should be in place to help people manage their work and family lives and who should bear the cost of work-family management.¹

Changing patterns of family formation and disruption have also created widespread concern and vociferous policy debates, forming a major theme of the “culture war” between liberals and conservatives. High divorce rates raise questions about the effects of divorce on children's well-being and future success and how to make “blended” families work. The problems facing single-parent families have become a focus of policy makers, religious leaders, and the national media. Debates about homosexual unions have led to battles over gay and lesbian marriage in a number of states and many local controversies over what legal rights should be extended to homosexual partners. Delayed marriage and childbearing mean that more American households comprise single adults and childless couples, and remaining childless throughout life has become much more common, fueling concern among some about the decline of the family.²

All of these changes have led to an increasing pluralism in family life and a new consensus that there are many kinds of loving, caring families.³ Most Americans spend some portion of their adult lives outside of a nuclear family, forming and re-forming familylike connections periodically over the course of their lives, causing many to rethink long-held assumptions about the necessity of marriage and parenting for adults' happiness, security, and well-being. But this pluralism is intensely contested and debated for both moral and social philosophical reasons. Not everyone agrees about what constitutes “the good family” and what kinds of families are morally legitimate. Many Americans see the family as the bellwether of our society and find the rapid and numerous

changes in family life over the last few decades to be troubling. Some argue that a devaluing of family life, and especially of lifelong, heterosexual marriage, inevitably leads to a decline of the nation.⁴

These debates also focus on questions of resources and inequality. Who has access to the rights that marriage confers? Why does divorce lead to a reduction in women's and children's standard of living, and what can be done to change that? The culture war is real and has real policy implications, and in our national discourse, a liberal/conservative divide has largely organized debates about the family. But a focus on divisions between liberals and conservatives obscures both the presence of consensus across these lines on many issues and the other sources of division that come into play as we argue over what constitutes a good family today.⁵

Changes in family life have been a central concern for religious leaders, activists, and local communities of faith. Throughout American history, religion and family have been intertwined and interdependent institutions.⁶ Congregations, parishes, and synagogues have provided an important context for families to spend time together and have shaped the religious education and moral development of children and youths. Sociologists have long noted that marriage and parenthood make religion more important to people and increase their participation in local congregations.⁷

The constancy of the link between religion and family can obscure the fact that "the family" participating in local congregations has varied markedly over time and in different social contexts. Religious familisms, or ideologies about the nature of "the good family," have also varied over time and among different religious traditions. For example, the 1950s saw a century-high peak in U.S. church attendance rates and religious institution building, coinciding with the beginning of the baby boom and burgeoning of a postwar family-oriented lifestyle.⁸ The religious expansion of the 1950s was organized around a particular kind of familism, central to which was the middle-class, male-breadwinner, suburban family profiled in classic sociological works such as William H. Whyte's *Organization Man* and idealized in the popular media through productions such as *Ozzie and Harriet*. The historical irony is that almost as soon as mainstream religious institutions had developed official discourse and local ministry to facilitate this particular form of the family, rapid and fundamental changes in work and in family life began to transform our society.

How have local religious communities responded to this period of rapid change in family life? And how have these changes transformed Americans' involvement in local religious communities? This book begins to develop answers to these questions about the religion-family link today through a study of four communities in upstate New York, ranging from rural to small-town to urban environments, and including middle-class and working-class areas. From 1998 through the summer of 2002, I collected data on the religious congregations in these communities through a survey of 125 local pastors,

participant-observation with a team of graduate students in twenty-three congregations, and focus groups with almost fifty pastors. At the same time, a telephone survey of just over one thousand community residents and eighty follow-up in-depth interviews provided a wealth of information about how people's family lives and work arrangements influenced their religious participation. The combination of qualitative and quantitative data on congregations and community residents provides rich detail about the interconnections between religion and family in these upstate New York communities. The appendix explains in detail why these communities were chosen and how the project data were collected.

These communities are not a microcosm of America or of American religion in the 1990s. They are about 94 percent white and have a religious ecology dominated by the mainstream religious institutions that one would have found in abundance here—and across America—for much of the twentieth century. Rather, these communities are an excellent location to study that portion of the religious landscape that was dominant in the 1950s and 1960s—the mainline Protestant, Catholic, and evangelical institutions that grew so rapidly in the postwar religious expansion and organized their ministry so particularly around the middle-class, nuclear, male-breadwinner family with children. These mainstream religious institutions helped to establish the Ozzie and Harriet family as a pervasive cultural ideal, one that still inspires nostalgia today.⁹ Although mainstream congregations and denominations today face increasing competition from newer religious forms,¹⁰ they still encompass the majority of churchgoing Americans and have major financial and material resources. And they are highly influential players in the American cultural scene, exerting public leadership in national and local debates about gay marriage, single-parent families, policies to help with work-family management, and other “family values” issues.

The story of how these religious institutions have transformed what they say about the family (rhetoric) and how they provide ministry to families (practices) sheds light on central questions in the sociology of religion. How does religious ideology change over time? How do the institutional routines established in a period of expansion and growth shape the capacity for religious organizations and leaders to act in the future? How do religious leaders maintain moral authority as society changes, and how do individuals make decisions about the meaning and relevance of religious participation in their own lives when they confront institutions that may be slow to respond to contemporary family realities? How do institutions that defined and defended the ideal of the suburban male-breadwinner family define the good family today, and how do they welcome—or exclude—people whose lives do not fit the former ideal?

These questions concern not only sociologists, but anyone who wants to understand the role that religious institutions play in society, how they maintain moral authority and exercise cultural power, how they thrive or decline

in the face of rapid social change, and how people judge them to be relevant, meaningful, and welcoming places. Throughout the book, I will argue that these communities provide a useful lens through which to examine the question of how a particular set of religious institutions have responded to changes in family life and how changes in the family have reconfigured religious commitment.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LOCAL—FAMILY IDEOLOGY AND LIVED RELIGION

When we think about religious responses to family-related issues, our minds turn immediately to televised images of evangelicals picketing local abortion clinics, chanting and carrying signs, perhaps being dragged away by the police. Or we remember hearing an interview with a Catholic bishop who weaves his views on abortion, gun control, and opposition to the death penalty into a consistent ethic of life. We may recall a newspaper article on the briefs filed by liberal religious leaders with the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court supporting the right of same-sex couples to marry. Religious leaders do not directly make policy but they do exercise a great deal of cultural power in American society—the power to bring issues to national attention, to shape policy debates and media coverage, and to change individuals' hearts and minds.¹¹

But most Americans do not encounter religious discourse about what is good, moral, and appropriate in family life solely, or even primarily, through news coverage or base their understandings on the pronouncements of religious elites and activists. People encounter religious ideas about the good family in the sermons and parenting workshops and adult education forums in their local congregations. They think anew about the centrality of family in women's lives when the church's annual Mother-Daughter Banquet is renamed the Women's Banquet and a speaker is invited to talk about women's contributions to local businesses and voluntary organizations. They confront the issue of whether homosexual unions are really "families" when they debate whether to become a congregation that is open and affirming to gays and lesbians.¹² Evangelical men confront what it means to be the "spiritual head" of the family in the intensive workshops on being a good husband and father run by their pastor or in a Promise Keepers group.¹³

People also encounter taken-for-granted assumptions about the centrality and importance of the family—and about what counts as a family—through the programs and ministries local congregations offer. Churches send messages about appropriate family lifestyles when they offer support groups for single parents or parenting classes designed for men. When the women's group meets at 10 A.M. on a Wednesday, women who work outside the home may conclude that traditional church-based women's groups are not relevant to their lives and not responsive to their concerns—and may either "vote with

their feet” and go elsewhere or become involved in a different set of church-based activities. A proliferation of intergenerational programs designed to include people in all life stages and family arrangements may make singles or childless couples feel that their choices are supported and recognized as legitimate, and offering babysitting during the Parish Council meeting facilitates the participation of adults in dual-earner and single-parent families.

There are more than three hundred thousand local religious congregations in the United States, and what happens in these congregations shapes the moral debate about the meaning and legitimacy of changes in the family and shapes who feels included or excluded from practicing their religious faith. Churches and synagogues influence individuals’ choices about marriage and parenting and how women and men divide responsibility for paid work and family caretaking. They influence people’s attitudes about the morality of divorce and single parenting and gay and lesbian lifestyles. They provide social capital, connection, and belonging that help ameliorate the disruptive effects of family transitions on people’s lives.

Local congregations do not simply reproduce official religious doctrine on family issues, but are creative arenas where new moral understandings are produced.¹⁴ Local congregations balance two moral imperatives when they confront changes in the family. Members and leaders want to do “what is right,” to be faithful to the authoritative teachings of their faith traditions. They also want to do “what is caring,” to be loving and inclusive of the real people and real families they encounter. Both are integral parts of lived religion, the basic moral requirements of religious community. Lived religion blunts the sharp edge of ideological zeal while new understandings of the good family evolve. This lived religion is what most Americans encounter and what shapes hearts and minds.

Understanding how face-to-face religious communities have responded to changes in family life and work-family arrangements is important for sociologists who analyze how religious institutions change over time and for anyone who wants to understand how religious institutions exercise cultural power and moral influence in American society. Understanding the “family values” that organize local congregational life is crucial for anyone who cares about the survival of faith communities in a changing world and the meaning of religious involvement for those who do not fit the Ozzie and Harriet family around which the last great religious expansion was organized.

This study was designed to uncover the moral frameworks through which local congregations grapple with the meaning and implications of the changing family. To some extent, the moral frameworks I found in these upstate New York communities do mirror the “culture wars” division between liberals and conservatives. This was particularly true when religious leaders were asked about general themes (“family ministry” or “changes in family life”) as opposed to specific issues. This excerpt from one pastor focus group conducted

in Tompkins County in June 2000 shows clear divisions among local pastors along liberal/conservative lines:

The pastor of a thriving independent Baptist congregation has just explained that in his church they try to avoid the term “family ministry” because it makes people who are not part of traditional “two kids and a dog” families feel left out. The focus group leader asks, “What about the rest of you? Do you use the terms ‘family ministry,’ or ‘family programming,’ or something else?” The following exchange occurs:

G.B., pastor of evangelical Lutheran congregation:

“. . . the traditional nuclear family is not a bad thing. And it has been around for some time and it has a fairly significant endorsement from Scripture. The Lord knows the Bible is filled with a bunch of nontraditional families. . . . And you know, God loves people despite the weaknesses that have led them sometimes to do, to do what they’ve done. . . . But you cannot lose the fact that God still endorses the family. It is [pause] I think a strong, um, prescription that God advocates the marriage of a husband and wife and their allegiance to the children and the children’s allegiance to the parents.”

R.H., pastor of a Unitarian congregation:

“Um, personally I think that we, we try to speak of normal families in *comparison or in contrast to the Bible*, because to me the Bible is just filled with a bunch of stories about dysfunctional families. I [pause] I can’t look at a Bible and find a family I would hold up as a model.” [emphasis in original]

S.W., pastor of independent Baptist congregation:

“I do hold up, you know Scriptural families as a model . . . and I say this, I’m very strongly convinced that whatever the Bible says is what is right, and I try not to change things because I think society’s changing. . . . Someone said earlier God has established the family. He has, you can discover the groundwork in the Scripture for the family. He hasn’t changed it, we have changed it, society’s changed it.”

R.H., pastor of a Unitarian congregation:

“You can go through the Bible and you just don’t find any normal families that you would hold up as a model.”¹⁵

However, differences between liberals and conservatives, although evident in some conversations and sermons and program materials, were not the main theme I found either in focus groups or in the fieldwork in local churches. More striking were the commonalities across conversations with pastors and lay leaders from disparate religious traditions—Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical. Most of these conversations revolved around the time bind faced by dual-earner couples or the problems of scheduling programs for children in an era of multiplying extracurricular activities. And congregations from all traditions were experimenting with changes in rhetoric and in programming to make working women, single parents, single adults, childless couples, and empty nesters feel more welcome.

Chapter 5 explores the rhetorics found in local congregations and used by their leaders in responding to changes in work and family life, and shows the influences of a liberal/conservative divide on local religious familism but also the consensus on the core family issues facing local faith communities across religious traditions. Part of this consensus stems from a widespread commitment to being as caring and inclusive as possible when confronted with the complex realities of members' lives. Chapter 6 shows the range of family-oriented ministries that local churches offer and analyzes the factors that lead congregations to be more or less responsive to the various changes in family life that have taken place in their communities. In this chapter I argue that the "standard package" of family ministry developed in the 1950s still shapes the programming and practices of many congregations today. And I examine the combination of theology, resources, denominational structure, pastoral training, and triggering events that lead some congregations to become distinctively innovative in the ways that they think and talk about family life and in the profile of ministries they provide.

This study also sheds light on changes in the meaning of religious involvement in individuals' lives after a period of rapid social change and on the interpretive frameworks that individuals use to make sense of the links between their own family lives and their religious participation. Many residents of these communities believe that religious involvement and family life go hand in hand, primarily because of the moral and ethical support that congregations provide for raising children and because congregations provide family-oriented social activities. Rachel told me at length about how religion and family fit together for her:

It's a rainy April afternoon. Over lunch at a dark little restaurant near the college campus, Rachel, a professional woman in her early thirties and the married mother of two, has just told me that her liberal Protestant church plays a central role in her family life. With worship services and religious education classes, potlucks and socials and monthly family nights with other couples from the church, her congregation not only provides a context in which her family spends time together, but also a network of church friends who provide emotional support and trade child care with her and her husband. When she pauses to eat a bite of her lunch, I ask her about her own religious beliefs. After a pause, she tells me that she considers herself an atheist but sees the value in a belief that God is in everyone, and feels sorry for people who don't have any kind of religion, because the rest of the world is all about "what makes money" or "what is efficient" or "what is trendy" but this is about "what is right." It's a caring and moral community that ponders, together, how to live a good life, and that's invaluable, and it's rare—"Most of the communities you're a part of aren't about that, and you need support for that."¹⁶

At least some single parents find the same kind of supportive environment in the congregations of these communities, especially single mothers. Jackie was typical of the single mothers we spoke to:

Jackie is a forty-nine-year-old divorced mother of three children who has attended her local Catholic parish regularly throughout her life. When she got married and started her own family she became even more involved and began teaching in the religious education program. She described the church as an “anchor” when her father was diagnosed with a brain tumor several years ago, and again when she went through her divorce. Now that her children are teenagers, she said that the parish and its activities bind them together at a time when it’s hard even to get everyone to sit down for a meal at the same time. She told us that her faith is central to every major decision she makes. When she was offered a promotion to a job that would have meant more money and status but also more time spent at work, she decided that “as long as I can make ends meet, spending more time with my family is what’s important.” So she turned down the promotion, a decision she told us was rooted in what her faith has to say about the importance of family.¹⁷

Rachel and Jackie raise several issues that are discussed in more detail in chapters 3 and 4. One of these issues is how one’s own experiences with family formation and disruption influence involvement in a local faith community. Chapter 3 shows that marriage and parenting still lead to increasing religious involvement and suggests that this is particularly true for men. However, local faith communities are also supportive environments for many single parents and those in blended families, and this is particularly true for women.

Chapter 4 begins to explore the question of the meaning of religious involvement in people’s lives and describes two different interpretive frameworks, or schemas, that people in these communities bring to bear in thinking about the links between religion and family. Rachel and Jackie both have a family-oriented schema that interprets religious involvement as central to the construction of a good family life—even for those, like Rachel, who do not affirm a religious faith. But many people in these communities have a more self-oriented schema that sees involvement in a local congregation primarily as an expression of their own religious faith, values, and spirituality. A self-oriented schema weakens the connection between family formation and religious involvement. Counter to conventional wisdom about gender and religion, more women than men have a self-oriented schema, and chapter 4 explores how gender influences the different understandings of family and religion in these communities.

Taken together, chapters 3 through 6 provide a rich understanding of how the congregations in these communities provide moral frameworks for understanding what a family is and what kinds of families are “good families.” They shed light on how local churches include or exclude people in various kinds of families and how they support or do not support people as they go through periods of family formation and disruption in their adult lives. They show the relationship between patterns of family formation and disruption and involvement in a local congregation and they provide a window into

different interpretive frameworks that people use to make sense of the fit between their religious involvement and their family lives. These chapters are informed by an intellectual perspective that foregrounds the moral and cultural power that religious communities wield in shaping how people understand contemporary family life, through what is said (rhetoric) and what is done (local practices). I also highlight the importance of institutional culture and history in shaping contemporary religious responses to changes in the family.

Part of the purpose of this book is to provide a “map” of the religion-family links in one set of communities after a period of rapid social change. But the remapping that is at the heart of this project extends beyond describing the links between religion and family in these communities today. It also includes the development of a new conceptual map for understanding religious familism and for thinking about the processes and mechanisms through which religious institutions respond to social change. I draw on theoretical language from the sociology of culture and institutional analysis to highlight the role of interpretive frameworks—or cultural schemas—in mediating two different change processes. The first is the process through which family formation motivates religious involvement, discussed in chapter 4. The second is how the rhetorics about family life in local churches filter which social changes congregations collectively “notice” and respond to, and the moral value they place on the contemporary pluralism in family life (chapter 5).

This intellectual remapping also involves engaging with sociological debates about how and why family formation motivates religious involvement and how and why religious institutions change as society changes. Chapter 2 outlines three theoretical traditions in the sociology of religion. The first is a structural location tradition that sees religious involvement as a “natural” and automatic outcome of family formation—particularly of marriage and parenting. My analysis of the links between marriage, parenting, and involvement in local religious life suggests that the “natural” and automatic link between religion and family formation is not so automatic today, but rather depends on how people interpret the meaning of religious involvement and its relevance to their own lives.

Chapter 2 also outlines the market or religious economy framework, which has become a dominant way for sociologists to understand how religious leaders act and how religious organizations respond to a changing environment. In these upstate New York communities, I found that some religious organizations and leaders respond to changes in family life like entrepreneurs in a market. Others respond like professionals embedded within particular institutional routines, and some engage in value-oriented action that is more concerned with “what is right” and “what is caring” than with “what works to increase market share.” Chapter 2 outlines the strengths of a cultural and institutional approach for understanding the processes and mechanisms through which change comes about

in religious institutions. Finally, chapter 2 addresses the question of whether local religious responses to changes in family life indicate increasing secularization and a decline in religious authority. Instead of secularization, I propose that these responses are more accurately described as a form of evolving orthodoxy that sacralizes many new family arrangements.

What unfolds over the next several chapters is a snapshot in time, but it is also the end point of a story. The 1950s religious expansion was a defining moment in the history of the religious institutions that form the religious ecology of these four communities in upstate New York. It was the era of unabashed religious familism, and the programs and ways of doing ministry developed then became a template that is still influential today. The story of the congregations in these communities is for most a story of small, incremental changes from this “standard package” of family-oriented ministry established in the 1950s; the story of a few is a more radical innovation that is based on a different understanding of what a family is and of the centrality of the family in congregational life. The story of people in these communities is a story of the development of different interpretive frameworks for understanding how religion and family might or should be related in an era of individualism and family pluralism, where orientations toward a host of “traditional” institutions have come into question. I hope to give a sense of why these stories matter and why they unfold the way that they do.

In the final chapter, I provide a critical consideration of how this study can shed light on larger questions about the religion-family link today, given the choice to focus on this particular place and these institutions. I use this study of how one set of religious institutions have responded to changes in work and family life to explore questions of religion’s role in society and how religious institutions change. My goal is to provide a language for how religious institutions change that does not assume that change is, itself, a sign of secularization or “accommodation” to secular values. The language of evolving orthodoxy provides this language of talking about change that judges whether secularization has occurred by some objective and a priori criterion and recognizes that change is a constant in all institutional arenas.

I also want to provide a language for describing American religion as an institutional arena that encompasses different logics of action as opposed to a market that operates by a single logic. Sometimes religious elites are entrepreneurs and some people do “shop” for a local church. But Rachel, quoted earlier, was right; religious institutions pour most of their members’ time and resources into doing what is right and what is caring, pursuing values seen as good in and of themselves, and following traditions that are valued for their own sake. Changes in family life juxtapose all of these concerns for religious leaders—what will work (and lead to thriving congregations instead of declining ones), what is right, what is caring, and how have we always done things before?

RELIGION AND FAMILY—RELATIONSHIPS OF DEPENDENCY AND CONTROL

Throughout the history of the United States, religion and family have been linked together through relationships of dependency and control.¹⁸ Mainstream religious institutions have responded to evolving family life and household arrangements by providing new ministries to meet families' needs in an ever-changing social context. New religious groups and movements such as the Shakers have formed around alternative family and household arrangements. But if changes in family life have had an impact on how religious institutions are organized, religious institutions have also provided moral guidelines that shape family practices, the organization of family life, and our perceptions of "the good family."

Religious institutions have depended on families to pass on the rituals and beliefs of a particular faith tradition. In colonial times, fathers, as heads of extended and production-oriented households, were often primarily responsible for the religious instruction of their wives and children, along with other dependents. In the nineteenth century, an industrial economy fostered more nuclear-family households and, in the latter half of that century, an emerging urban middle class with a male-breadwinner lifestyle. A new emphasis on mothers' responsibility for the religious well-being of children and husbands emerged in the context of home-centered religious education and devotional practices.¹⁹

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Sunday School and other formal religious education programs were partly successful in moving the religious instruction of children out of the home and into the congregation or parish; these did not eliminate, but rather worked to reinforce, the home-based rituals central to religious socialization.²⁰ From the mid-nineteenth century onward, Protestant churches experienced ongoing tension and controversy over the "feminization" of religion. In the twentieth century a similar tension developed in the Catholic church, with religious elites working to retain religious authority in the face of home-centered religious practices that often deviated from officially endorsed ritual and doctrine.²¹ This tension became heightened in post-World War II America, as Protestant and Catholic churches thrived in the rapidly expanding middle-class suburbs. As local congregations organized numerous—and popular—ministries for women and children, religious leaders warned anew that the "feminization" and "privatization" of religion were taking time and resources away from more important "public" goals such as social justice and outreach to the poor.²²

If families have influenced religious institutions, they have also depended on them for the moral socialization of children, for reinforcing a sense of ethnic identity and continuity, and for important rituals that mark life-course transitions—weddings and funerals, bar and bat mitzvahs, baptisms and

brises. Confirmation and Sunday School classes welcome children into moral adulthood. Methodist and Baptist churches pass out Bibles with students' names stamped in gold letters on the front to seniors in celebration of high school graduation, and priests bless the celebration of girls' *quince años* in Mexican American communities. Religious involvement, many argue, has been functional for families, associated with lower rates of divorce and higher levels of satisfaction in marriage, parenting, and other family relationships.²³

These relationships of mutual dependency have also had an aspect of social control. Religious institutions in the United States have promoted familism, the ideology that the family is the central, most fundamental unit of social order in a society.²⁴ Familistic ideologies are historically specific and vary over time and place. They do not promote the idea that any kind of family is equally valid, but rather tend to idealize certain forms and functions of the family, defining them as legitimate, valuable, and morally correct, even essential for the health of the nation.²⁵

A few utopian religious communities have experimented with forms of communal organization that do not rely on some form of nuclear, patriarchal family as the basic unit of social organization. But generally, mainstream religious institutions in the United States have promoted stable, monogamous, heterosexual marriages that produce children. They have bolstered parental authority and have discouraged premarital and extramarital sex. Religious institutions have contributed to a normative consensus in our society, stronger in some times and places than in others, that being an unmarried adult, deciding to remain childless, or living in a same-sex union are at best unfortunate states in which to find oneself, and at worst irresponsible, deviant, or immoral choices that should be sanctioned.²⁶ For much of American history, religious institutions have promoted ideologies that interpret men's and women's natures as fundamentally different, and they have encouraged the development of various versions of the ideology of separate spheres, with male activity concentrated in the realm of work and civic life (defined as public) and women's activity concentrated in the home and church (defined as private). Many mainstream religious groups today endorse various forms of traditionally gendered family roles.²⁷

Of course, the specific forms of family behavior and specific ideals of the good family have varied over time and according to ethnicity, social class, and religious tradition. Churches in the African American tradition have found ways to value extended, maternal-based family networks, although they have also sought to bolster male familial authority in the context of a society that systematically disempowers black men.²⁸ In the 1960s, sociologists documented large Catholic/Protestant differences in childrearing and other family behaviors, with Catholics favoring more extended family networks and emphasizing the importance of obedience and conformity in children. By the 1980s, such differences had largely disappeared as Catholics experienced upward social

and economic mobility.²⁹ The major differences in childrearing norms and behaviors were between those who attended church (any church) and those who did not. Church attenders were more likely to favor conformity in children and traditional gender roles—a convergence around a male-breadwinner nuclear family ideal.³⁰

In the 1990s, sociologists began to argue that the major differences in family ideology and behavior today are driven by the presence of a distinct conservative Protestant subculture, which endorses an ideology of male household headship and a preference for obedience in children. A historical treatment, however, shows that the label *conservative* is too broad to characterize the response of those on the religious right to post-1950s family change. Fundamentalist Protestants, the most conservative end of the spectrum, have resisted any rhetoric that embraces equality between men and women and have maintained a strict focus on paternal authority and obedience in children in practice as well as in rhetoric. More moderate evangelicals, while maintaining a rhetoric of the man as “spiritual head” of the house, have been more flexible and adaptable on questions of women’s labor-force participation and have remained more egalitarian and nurturing in practice than in rhetoric.³¹

Such religiously based family norms affect behaviors within families, but some have also become overtly politicized. One of the major grounds of the “culture war” has been family norms and behaviors.³² Some have argued that two different cultural models of the family not only are linked to liberal/conservative differences in the areas of birth control, abortion, gay marriage, and other “family values” issues, but also underlie many other culture war policy differences, including different ideas about economic development, welfare, and access to political representation. Because liberal and conservative models of the family are based on and uphold fundamentally different understandings of the division between the public and the private, they foster different understandings of the link between family behavior and citizenship.³³

It is important to draw out and examine the public nature of religious institutions, because most scholars have treated religion and family as being in the private sphere.³⁴ As Stephen Hart argues:

Both provide values; both provide a context where one is valued (more than elsewhere) as a whole person rather than on the basis of specific contributions; both provide companionship, support, and non-material pleasures; both help people who do not find much meaning in their work lives feel that their lives are meaningful; and both provide a framework for seeing oneself as a good person and one’s life as basically good, independent of the success that one has in acquiring money, fame, or power. Both are “private” spheres in contrast to work or politics and one’s relation to the state, and as such are felt to be spheres of individual autonomy and dignity, free of the constraints one’s job or government imposes. (Hart 1986, pp. 51–52)

But I argue that it makes more sense to see religion and family as encompassing aspects of both private and public life. Families link the individual to broader connections with the workplace, with civil society, and the state. The way in which families are defined has important public implications. To take just one example, comparable worth policies historically have found less support among those who endorse a religiously based view of the man as the family breadwinner.³⁵ Today, welfare policies are formed by a policy elite that wants to discourage single-parent families not just on practical grounds regarding children's well-being, but also because many find such families to be morally illegitimate. Feminists have long argued that families are not naturally "private" but are defined as such, in part by religious institutions.³⁶ Defining family as "private" systematically deemphasizes the importance of women's typical daily lives and concerns in the political arena. As a result, women are not in practice treated as full citizens in the same sense as men are, and they are vulnerable to the violation of their rights, including in some cases the very basic right to physical safety within their homes.

Religious institutions are also public in the sense of being a part of civil society not controlled by the state. They provide a public arena of moral discourse and a location for building "community" and the social capital that entails. Religious institutions provide ideologies and identities that mobilize people for political and social action on a wide range of issues. The role of religious leaders in the controversy over gay marriage is a concrete example of how religious institutions mediate the relationship between the family and the state. Conservative religious leaders have lobbied to block legal recognition of same-sex marriages at both the state and national level, providing a moral rationale for laws that designate heterosexual marriage as a specific kind of legal status with publicly enforceable obligations while not providing that status for same-sex unions. Liberal religious leaders have advocated for legal same-sex marriage on religious and moral grounds. And gay and lesbian couples engage in joining ceremonies in churches in part because they view this as an alternative way to gain a form of legal, public sanctioning of a union that the state does not recognize.³⁷

The assumption that religion and family are private institutions has dominated scholarship in the sociology of religion, but it is clear that these institutions operate in both the public and the private sphere as these traditionally have been understood. It is more analytically useful, then, to think of both religion and family as institutions that connect individuals to public life and to ask questions about how those connections are conceptualized and practiced in different times and places. Three kinds of questions seem especially helpful in designating a location from which to begin a different kind of scholarly inquiry into the religion-family link. Do religious institutions today define the family, in practice and in rhetoric, as a private institution? What cultural model of the family are contemporary congregations organized around? And does the

historical association between religious institutions and a privatistic, “separate spheres” family ideology make them a less comfortable fit for contemporary men and women, who have experienced within one or two generations rapid changes in work and family roles?

THE 1950s RELIGIOUS EXPANSION AND POST-1950s FAMILY CHANGE

These questions become even more central because the last great religious expansion in the United States institutionalized programs and ways of doing things that facilitated a revival of a form of familism that defined the family as a private “haven in a heartless world” and assumed a traditionally gendered division of labor in the home.³⁸ The 1950s saw rapid growth in organized religion and century-high levels of church attendance, as new congregations sprang up overnight, especially in the booming postwar suburbs. This 1950s religious revival was driven by changes in commuting patterns, rising marriage and birth rates, changing child-rearing patterns, and prosperity, which allowed more and more families to adopt the male-breadwinner lifestyle.

Congregations embraced these developments with enthusiasm, expanding their programs for children, teens, and women and developing social activities for the whole family. Such programs became a “standard package” of family ministries, a template that was widely disseminated, borrowed, and reproduced.³⁹ This standard package not only assumed a two-parent family, but was based on a specific middle-class male-breadwinner version of it. Of course, the male-breadwinner family did not describe a majority of Americans even in the 1950s. But it was upheld as an ideal, and congregational practices and rhetoric were organized around supporting the middle-class, suburban, organization-man lifestyle.⁴⁰ For example, the increasing numbers of women’s ministries generally met during the daytime. This made them largely unavailable to women who worked outside the home. But for stay-at-home mothers, daytime United Methodist Women meetings (or the Altar Guild at the Catholic parish or the Sisters Group at the local temple) meant evenings that were free for spending time with their families or watching the children while husbands went to evening church (parish, temple) council meetings.

It is important to emphasize that the profamily rhetoric, the organization of local church life to promote a male-breadwinner family, and concerns about conformity and purity in teens—features that we associate today with evangelical Protestantism—were promoted with great vigor by mainline Protestant and Catholic churches in the 1950s and were part of a very public effort to endorse a particular kind of family lifestyle.⁴¹ In her excellent study *Growing Up Protestant*, the historian Margaret Bendroth argues that the public, overt familism of mainline Protestants and Catholics in the 1950s paved the way for the

mainstreaming of evangelical religious familism a decade later. Moreover, the ideal family of 1950s mainline Protestant and Catholic churches was not so different from the ideal family of evangelicals today; across these traditions an emphasis on a patriarchal family that was nevertheless loving and nurturing—a kind of “domesticated” patriarchy—was a common theme.⁴²

The male-breadwinner lifestyle must have seemed not only right but even inevitable to many church leaders in the 1950s. The proportion of households comprising two married parents and one or more children peaked, reaching a century-high level of 43 percent with the postwar baby boom. But what may have seemed like historical inevitability turned out to be only an anomaly, and a relatively short-lived one at that. By the 1990s, the male-breadwinner family was only a memory to most Americans, surviving in a few of the most affluent suburban enclaves. Congregations found themselves facing an entirely different landscape.

Post-1950s Changes in Family Life

Family life today is very different than it was in the 1950s for the vast majority of Americans.⁴³ Table 1.1 shows some of these differences at a glance. The dual-earner family has become the most common family form. A large and growing literature on the dual-earner couple supports the idea that a specific dual-earner lifestyle, based primarily on the values of middle-class managers and professionals, is becoming culturally normative in our society, and that other institutions are beginning to adapt to this lifestyle.⁴⁴

Of course, the dual-earner couple is not a new family form. In 1950, both parents spent at least some time each year in the paid labor force in fully half of all families with children. But the dual-earner family has become much more common, and the number of joint hours spent at paid work by husbands and wives on a regular basis has rapidly increased.⁴⁵ And the dual-earner family form has spread widely throughout white, middle-class America, a marked change from the 1950s. Most mothers, even of very young children, now work outside the home for pay, and many work full-time. The change in the relationships among gender, work, and family is one of the most fundamental social transformations during this period.

There has been an ongoing debate about the effects of this transformation on family life. Some argue that the “time squeeze” encountered in dual-earner households has caused greater levels of stress and anxiety for women and various other problems in managing family life on a daily basis. Others argue that women who work outside the home have less stress and better relationships with their spouses and children, and point to the beneficial effects of having two jobs to buffer the family from economic uncertainty.⁴⁶ More generally, if Americans work more, they are also getting more education and working better jobs for higher pay.⁴⁷ And although most Americans still view

TABLE 1.1
Changes in Families and Households, United States, 1950–2000

<i>Household Composition</i>	1950	2000
Percentage of all households composed of married couples (with or without children)	78	53
Percentage of all households composed of married couples with children younger than eighteen	43	25
Percentage of all households composed of single-parent families	11	16
Percentage of all <i>family households</i> ^a composed of single-parent families	8	23
Percentage of all households composed of single adult, living alone	11	31
<i>Family Labor-Force Participation</i>	1970	2000
Percentage of married mothers with children younger than six who worked some time during the year	44	68
Percentage of married mothers with children younger than six who worked year-round, full-time	10	33
Percentage of families with children under 18 in which both parents had work experience	50	72
Percentage of families with children under 6 in which both parents had work experience	44	67
Percentage of families with children under 6 in which both parents worked year round, full time	7	28

Sources: Figures on household composition are taken from U.S. Bureau of the Census, <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/htabHH-1.txt>, accessed 02/17/04, and <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/htabFM-1.txt>, accessed 02/18/04; figures for 1970 labor-force participation are taken from Howard V. Hayghe and Susan M. Bianchi, "Married Mothers' Work Patterns," *Monthly Labor Review* (June 1994): 24–30; figures for labor-force participation for 2000 are taken from <ftp.bls.gov/pub/news.release/History/famee.04192001.news>, accessed 02/17/04.

Note: ^a Defined as two or more related persons living together.

the management of work-family conflict as a "women's issue," it is also true that marriage and parenting have become more central in men's lives and identities.⁴⁸

In addition to the rise of the dual-earner household, there are more and more households not organized around two parents raising children. Much larger and more stable portions of the population remain unmarried or childless throughout much of their adult lives than in the 1950s. More couples live together and raise children without being married. There are more single

parents; divorce and blended families are much more common. Gay and lesbian lifestyles, although still controversial in some parts of American society, have gained a great deal of legitimacy and visibility. Frank Furstenberg, one of the most prominent sociologists studying family life, argues: “Marriage is no longer the master event that orchestrates the onset of sexual relations, parenthood, the departure from home, or even the establishment of a household. These events have become . . . discrete moments in the life course” (1999: 148). Although the large majority of Americans still aspire to marriage, many no longer see marriage and parenting as necessary or automatic parts of establishing an adult life.

Accompanying the changes in family form and in women’s roles in society have been changes in people’s attitudes and beliefs about gender roles. Prior to the 1970s, polls show that most Americans agreed with statements like, “It’s better for everybody if the man earns the money and the woman takes care of the home and family.” Since the mid-1970s, Americans have displayed more egalitarian ideas about gender roles and have come to favor not only fathers’ increased involvement in child rearing, but also policies that grant women greater access to “public” goods—good jobs, equal pay, and political power. More generally, Americans have come to have an individualistic orientation toward many institutions, including work, family, and religion, and to feel that assigning individuals roles in society based on ascriptive characteristics—gender and race, for example—is wrong.⁴⁹

As a result of these changes, mainstream religious institutions in the United States have faced a large-scale and fundamental transformation in the institution to which their fate historically has been most closely tied. A period of rapid religious expansion and institution-building in the 1950s was organized around a form of family life that quickly peaked and rapidly faded away. It is not that all families in the 1950s were of the male-breadwinner type; fully half were not. It is not that suburbs, or even male-breadwinner families, have completely disappeared. But religious organizations that promoted a suburban male-breadwinner lifestyle as ideal and organized themselves around this model of the family found themselves with programs, rituals, and discourses targeted to a rapidly decreasing proportion of the population. How have religious institutions responded? And has the response led to the maintenance of the tight link between religion and family that was characteristic of the 1950s religious expansion?

The Effects of Post-1950s Changes on Local Religious Communities

There has been relatively little work analyzing how local religious communities have responded to these changes in work and family. In a case study of one mainline Protestant church she calls Briarglen, Penny Long Marler (1995) outlines what she believes may be a typical response of churches within that

tradition. Briarglen has been successful in attracting a younger generation of dual-earner families with children. These families have less time and more money than the previous generation of members, and their participation largely takes the form of writing checks to support ministries for their children, while an older generation provides the labor to make the ministries work. Marler asks whether the current generation of dual-earner parents will bother to stay with the church once their children are grown, and she raises the question of whether the mainline Protestant decline in membership since the 1960s may be linked to an inability to form a better response to changes in women's roles, work, and family. She also argues that the focus on two-parent families with children stems from a nostalgia for the 1950s and leads to the exclusion of the increasing numbers of single parents, long-term singles, and childless couples in our society.

Leaders of mainline Protestant and Catholic traditions share Marler's concerns and trace the problem to the historical development that Margaret Bendroth described in her book *Growing Up Protestant*. From the 1960s on, mainline Protestant denominations have poured energy into developing new ministries around more valued "public" outreach—peace, justice, and poverty ministries. A focus on family ministry is often seen as directly competing with more "public" forms of outreach for members' time, money, and effort. And this, some argue, has contributed to the decline of mainline Protestantism. Religious leaders and sympathetic academics from these traditions have called for members and leaders of mainstream religious groups to rejoin the public dialogue on family issues, which has largely been ceded to evangelical Protestants, who see the family as a central focus of mission, not a distraction from more important goals or activities.⁵⁰

Evangelical leaders have responded to the increasing gender egalitarianism of American society by developing discourses that emphasize mutuality, caring, and sharing within the household rather than a strict exercise of patriarchal authority.⁵¹ Case studies suggest that evangelical Protestant congregations have adapted well to dual-earner families, and that pastors from these traditions see the development of more contemporary forms of family ministry as a natural extension of their prior activities and a positive mission priority.⁵² Case studies of Catholic parishes have also tended to show that they have adapted well to changes in women's work and family roles, although as with evangelical Protestants, there are limits to the kinds of contemporary families many Catholic parishes will embrace.⁵³

Although scholars have focused a great deal of attention on the official responses of religious leaders to changes in work, family, and gender, looking at the rhetoric developed in advice books or other "official" texts, our knowledge about congregational response to family change is piecemeal. There have been a few case studies of individual congregations. But we have no good comparative studies of local congregations that would allow us to identify how and why

they vary in the kinds of family ministry they provide, or the variation in the kinds of individuals and families that they attract. So it is hard to know if the congregations that case studies focus on are typical and what the range of response is within and across religious traditions. We know relatively more about evangelical Protestant congregations, but have little knowledge of what is going on within Catholic parishes, Jewish synagogues, or other religious communities.

In addition, we need to understand the impact of religious institutions' adaptations on their ability to attract contemporary families and individuals. Do those who are not in a male-breadwinner or intact two-parent family arrangement find religious organizations relevant and meaningful in their lives? Do they feel welcome in local congregations? What effect does religious involvement have on individuals' choices about work and family, or on child rearing, or on relationships between husbands and wives? Constructing a new map of the religion-family nexus requires understanding not only what religious institutions are doing, but also how religious institutions are linked to family formation and work for the contemporary families—and individuals—of the 1990s.

In terms of understanding the effect of changes in family and work on religious participation, scholars have looked at only a limited set of questions.⁵⁴ There has been little research on the effects of divorce and other forms of family disruption on religious involvement, and little research on the involvement of single parents, those in blended families, or long-term singles. We know that family formation is still associated with religious involvement, but we do not know if this is equally true for men and women because research on men's and women's involvement has focused almost exclusively on the "gender gap" in church attendance and not on the processes of religious affiliation or the meaning religious involvement has in men's and women's lives.⁵⁵ We know that paid employment increases men's religious involvement and that women who attend church regularly are more likely to work part-time when children arrive,⁵⁶ but there has been too little research on how religious involvement might affect individuals' decisions about the hours they spend at work or about accepting promotions or transfers to jobs with more travel.

If there are gaps in what we know about congregations and the religious commitment of individuals, there are also silences created by our conceptual categories. Most sociologists accept at face value the idea that religious involvement is functional for families, and this has consequences both for the interpretation of research findings and for what kinds of questions are asked. For example, scholars emphasize not the structural inequality between men and women in evangelical churches, but the negotiated and more egalitarian practices within evangelical families. We know from other research that work-family issues are treated largely as private matters in the United States, and that

businesses off-load the costs of managing work and family onto individuals, thus “privatizing” the cost of coping with social change. Do religious institutions contribute to this idea that family is a private institution and that troubles managing work and family are private troubles, the costs of which should be borne by individuals, not companies or the state? There has been little or no research on questions such as these.

One of the main goals of this book is to understand how congregations have adapted to changes in work and family in their rhetoric, in their formal programming, and in their everyday practices. Another goal is to analyze how individuals’ work and family contexts affect religious involvement in a way that includes an examination of family disruption, alternative life-course pathways, and nontraditional family arrangements. This will generate a good map of the current linkages between religion and family in these four communities. Put together, the answers to the questions posed here also add up to a larger pattern that can help us to refine our theoretical account of how religious institutional change comes about. This more theoretical analysis will allow for a critical examination of theories about the role of religion in the contemporary United States, as well as theories about the overall direction or outcome of religious institutional change.

THE RELIGION AND FAMILY PROJECT

In formulating a way to conduct research that would shed light on these questions, I made several key choices. First, I decided that such a study should be conducted in a way that would allow for simultaneously answering two kinds of questions. What has happened inside religious organizations and institutions faced with changes in work and family? And how are religious institutions intertwined with the lives of individuals and families in contemporary society? I decided the study must be an analysis of reciprocal relationships, examining how two historically connected institutions have changed over time.

In examining how religious institutions have adapted to changes in family life, it made sense to focus on local congregations. Religious elites make pronouncements about family life, and the scholarly discourse on religious groups’ family ideologies is quite well developed. But local congregations directly provide ministry to individuals and families, and it is these organizations in which the vast majority of the religiously involved participate. Unlike some other, newer forms of local religious community, congregations were associated in the 1950s with a very specific work-family lifestyle, and so changes in work and family may pose particular challenges for them. Local congregations may fall in line with official pronouncements, but in fact they often do not, particularly in

areas such as women's roles or lifestyle choices.⁵⁷ Yet our knowledge of how the religion-family link works at the level of the local congregation is limited to a few case studies.

A focus on the congregation excludes some new institutional forms that are increasingly common in the American religious landscape. Small groups such as the Promise Keepers and informal networks of religious practice that come together only occasionally for common rituals comprise increasingly more religious participants. Parachurch groups organized around single-issue policy, lifestyle, charitable, or activist causes have also grown in recent decades.⁵⁸ Any more comprehensive study of religious change would have to take the emergence of these forms into account. But congregations still comprise far more regular religious participants than any of these forms. And a focus on the congregation allows me to examine how those institutional forms that were dominant during the 1950s religious expansion have adapted to changes in work and family.

Another choice was to take an explicitly ecological approach to the research design. An ecological approach implies a focus on a few specific communities in order to understand how the local context influences processes of social change. Particularly important was the decision to pick communities that varied in socioeconomic status and in population density. Many studies of American religion have focused on a white, suburban middle-class environment, and although infinite variation is not possible in a small-scale study, some variation in resources and lifestyles is desirable because it prevents universalizing one particular set of middle-class experiences as "the" American religious experience. The changes in work and family that have occurred in the society at large matter less than local demographics and economics in driving the "demand" for voluntary organizations in general and churches in particular.⁵⁹ See box 1.1 for a brief description of the four communities chosen.

These four communities are described in more detail in the appendix, which also includes tables that compare census data from each community to national figures for both 2000 and 1960. These communities have experienced the same major transitions that most of the nation has experienced in that forty-year period, including the decline of farm-related jobs and the increase in white-collar managerial and professional employment, rising levels of education, a decline in the portion households composed of two parents with children, and a rise in dual-earner families. These communities differ from national averages, however, in some ways. They range between 90 and 97 percent white (the national average is 80 percent). This means that they contain no areas with significant nonwhite populations and no areas with a concentration of new immigrant groups. Tompkins County and Liverpool are more middle-class (well-educated, professional) than the national average, whereas Seneca County and Northside are considerably less educated and have fewer professionals than the U.S. population as a whole.

Box 1.1
Religion and Family Project—4 Communities

Liverpool, a metropolitan, white, professional/middle-class suburb outside of Syracuse. Liverpool contains both an older, more established middle class as well as a younger generation of managers and professionals who work for the major employers of the Syracuse metropolitan area.

Northside, a metropolitan, working-class neighborhood in Syracuse, with ethnic diversity and a history of economic decline, experiencing some influx of urban renewal money.

Seneca County, a nonmetropolitan county with a stable agricultural base and a largely working-class population, many of whom commute to a city in a neighboring county for service-sector jobs.

Tompkins County, a nonmetropolitan county with a large central town that is economically prosperous, Cornell University and other major employers, and a largely middle-class, professional population.

There is another form of ecological influence on congregational adaptation to social change, and that is the embeddedness of each congregation within a local organizational ecology, a network of interacting congregations and the other voluntary organizations. Congregations look to peers in their own communities for ministry ideas, borrowing through local networks of cooperation and information exchange. They also self-consciously define themselves against similar congregations in the community in order to establish a distinctive profile that will attract more members. In engaging in this kind of “borrowing and niching” processes within local networks of reference, congregational leaders are like other agents of organizational innovation.⁶⁰

These ecological considerations prompted me to gather information through a census survey of all of the congregations in a four-community area. The survey instrument was designed to gather information about each congregation’s history and programming, the pastor’s own views on family-related issues, and congregational networks of peers and competitors. Follow-up fieldwork in twenty-three area congregations and focus groups with almost fifty local pastors not only allowed me to clarify and elaborate themes that emerged from the survey but also to discover issues and problems confronting local churches that the survey had not uncovered.

In the appendix, the religious ecology in these four communities is compared to the national sample of congregations drawn in 1998 for the National Congregations Study (NCS). Reflecting the history of these communities, the religious ecology is more heavily Catholic and mainline Protestant than the national average, and 76 percent of the congregations here were founded

before 1965. Because these congregations tend to be larger than independent Baptist and nondenominational churches, and because smaller congregations were more likely not to respond to our survey, there are also more large congregations represented here than in the NCS sample.⁶¹

In order to examine the question of how local community residents think about and participate in local congregations, a random-digit-dial telephone survey of more than one thousand community residents was conducted by a professional survey team operating at Cornell University. This survey was followed by eighty in-depth interviews with survey respondents, split evenly between church-attenders and those not involved in a local congregation. The appendix describes the data collection in detail.

It is very common for those who do small-scale community or case studies to claim that, in effect, the world is reflected in a grain of sand. But it is perhaps more useful to understand the particular ways in which any given small-scale study is exemplary in order to understand the broader significance offered by a close analysis of a given locale. It is appropriate to treat these communities as exemplary of a particular kind of religious ecology that is still heavily influenced by the family ideology and the template for family ministry that was so formative in the 1950s religious expansion. In one sense, then, this is a case study of the continuing influence of the male-breadwinner family ideal and how nostalgia for this family form shapes and limits the capacity of voluntary organizations and local community institutions to adapt to changes in family life.

It is also a study of how and why some local organizations are able to adopt radically new understandings of family life in ways that nevertheless build on authentic aspects of their religious traditions. One of the broadly applicable insights from this study is that this kind of religiously authentic innovation leads to vitality and growth, whereas a nostalgic longing for the past leads to decline—for liberal and conservative, Protestant and Catholic religious communities. This is important for those who want to understand how the fate of religious institutions is tied up with the changing family.

It is also important to hear the voices of those in moderate and liberal religious traditions who continue to focus on the family as a centrally important religious issue and who have managed, at the local level, to adapt to changes in family life in a way that is consonant with the feminist and social justice strands of their religious traditions. Many Catholic and mainline Protestant congregations in these communities both acknowledge the painful effects of family disruption and provide a strong moral vision for family life. They do this while affirming egalitarian relationships between men and women, favoring more help from businesses and government for those struggling to balance work and family life, and endorsing the legitimacy of new forms of loving, committed relationship. At the national level, religious discourse on such

family values issues has largely been ceded to conservatives. This impoverishes our ongoing national conversation on the changing family and leaves many Americans with the idea that all religious institutions are alike—to the point where some moderate Americans forsake any religious identification whatsoever.⁶²

This study can also shed light on whether those in nontraditional families have access to the social support and social capital that flow from participation in local religious communities. The survey of community residents and in-depth interviews, as well, point to barriers facing single parents, the divorced, and those in blended families, for whom religion is very salient but who find it hard to participate in local religious communities because of pragmatic difficulties of timing and scheduling—difficulties that are structural and likely to be widespread in our society. Congregations provide an important arena of social support for those who participate. Social support can be crucial in ameliorating the most harmful effects of family disruption on both adults and children, establishing a future trajectory that leads to happiness, stability, and the capacity to form healthy relationships throughout life.⁶³

These communities also provide a window on more theoretical questions about how a person's gender, work situation, and family context shape religious participation and how religious institutions change over time. For sociologists, perhaps the most important insight this study generates is the need to take into account how interpretive frameworks shape social action. Religious institutions adapt to changes in family life in a way that is shaped by interpretive frameworks that identify which issues to pay attention to and bundle those with different sets of practical and symbolic responses. The language of institutional analysis and evolving orthodoxy, outlined in the next chapter, is meant to provide a way to analyze these normal processes of change without resorting to an assumption that secularization is natural and inevitable. Likewise, individuals interpret the fit between religion and family differently, and this shapes both their patterns of religious participation and the meaning of that participation. This particular form of individualism is not new, but is rather a constitutive feature of the voluntarism and pluralism that have always characterized American religion.

The next chapter shows how this local study of the interconnection between religion and family can reshape our theoretical frameworks in the sociology of religion. The chapters that follow show the interpretive frameworks and daily practices that are reworking the religion-family link in these communities. Without the acrimony or fanfare of the culture war, these local religious communities are quietly going about the business of redefining the meaning of family, gender, and work and the centrality of the family in local religious life. And the individuals who live and work in these communities are

making their own moral judgments about the fit between family and religion and the relevance of religious participation for their own lives. In upstate New York, the cultural contestation over the good family continues on a daily basis. Understanding how this cultural contestation plays out in these communities is a first step in better understanding religious familism in a changing society.