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October 28, 2005

Posted: 10/28/05

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Religion News Service

WASHINGTON (RNS)—Most Americans continue to believe that “God's plan for marriage is one man, one woman, for life,” but they still are tolerant of those who divorce, a new survey on family and faith shows.

A poll by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research conducted for the PBS program Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly found 71 percent of Americans said they believe in the ideal of lifelong traditional marriage. But just 22 percent of those surveyed agreed “divorce is a sin.”

Religious conservatives were most likely to agree that divorce is sinful. But they still were a minority within their own ranks, with 34 percent of evangelical Christians and 30 percent of traditional Catholics saying divorce is sinful.

The survey also looked at the religious practices of traditional and nontraditional families and how people prioritize moral values. The survey was released ahead of a four-part series on “Faith and Family in America” that will be broadcast by Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly.

More than half of the people polled—52 percent—said divorce can be the best solution when a couple can't work out their marital problems. This sentiment about divorce mostly held across the religious spectrum, with 63 percent of those who described themselves as liberal Catholics agreeing, along with 61 percent of mainline Protestants, 50 percent of people with no religious preference, 48 percent of evangelical Christians and 46 percent of traditional Catholics.

John Green, professor of political science and director of the Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron in Ohio, said the tension between the ideal image and real stresses of marriage and family life reflects the success of churches and other religious institutions in upholding a high standard for marriage.

“On the one hand, it may be that the ideal has persisted precisely because the reality has changed,” said Green, who helped analyze the survey results. “On the other hand, Americans have become much, much more tolerant of deviations from that ideal.”

Researchers found stark differences, along with some similarities, in the religious practices and beliefs of traditional and nontraditional families, which they categorized as married parents with children younger than 18 (traditional) and unmarried parents with children younger than 18 (nontraditional). For example, half the traditional parents said they attend religious services at least once a week, compared with only one-third of nontraditional parents.

But both sets of parents are almost equally likely to say religion is “very important” in their lives—55 percent of nontraditional versus 59 percent of traditional—and to say they read religious Scriptures each week—49 percent of both traditional and nontraditional families).

Brad Wilcox, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Virginia,

also provided analysis of some of the survey results. He noted that while researchers have found Protestants, including evangelicals, are not more likely than other groups to remain married, there is a strong link between religious practice and stable marriage.

“Folks who go to church or to synagogue on a regular basis are much less likely to divorce,” he said.

The survey also revealed how Americans define the term “moral values.”

Asked whether certain phrases meet their definition of the term, the highest percentage—36 percent—chose “personal values, such as honesty and responsibility.” That was followed by “family values, such as trying to protect children from sex and violence on TV and the Internet.” Social issues, including abortion and gay marriage, and social justice matters, such as human rights and discrimination, each were cited by only 10 percent of the people surveyed.

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