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“What Strengthens a Marriage: Religion or Education?”

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Americans like marriage.

At this moment, about 55 percent of Americans are married, and fewer than 10 percent of Americans over 60 have never been married. Marriage provides love, companionship and a stable home life, with or without children. Most religions place a high value on getting married and remaining married

Remaining married is hard. Just ask the citizens of Cheyenne. In 2010, Cheyenne had the second-highest divorce rate of any city in the USA, just behind Las Vegas, according to a report published by Men's Health magazine. In Wyoming, one in five divorces took place in Cheyenne during the five-year period ending in 2009. The magazine's 2014 report indicates Cheyenne's rank has eased a bit, falling to fourth place, with Las Vegas dropping to eighth.

Reporting by the Wyoming Tribune Eagle and Men's Health points to economic stress on the family as a significant cause of divorce. When job loss or financial instability is added to other marital stresses, it often tips the scale and leads to the divorce court.

So, what strengthens a marriage? The emphasis placed by religions on strong marriages and families would suggest that religion -- in the USA, that overwhelmingly refers to Christianity -- provides the best support. Well, not always. According to a 1999 Barna Research Group report, many Christian denominations have poor divorce rates.

While 25 percent of American adults have been divorced at least once, 29 percent of Baptists have divorced. For Christians in nondenominational churches (read “born-again”), that rate rises to 34 percent. By contrast, mainline Protestants are average at 25 percent, while Mormons are just under at 24 percent and Catholics somewhat lower at 21 percent.

If the high divorce rate among Baptists and nondenominational churches strikes you as a mistake, it is not. A look at divorce rates by state in 2009 (U.S. Census Bureau figures) shows that the highest divorce rates are concentrated in the American South -- from

Oklahoma to Georgia, from Louisiana to Kentucky -- where these forms of Christianity are predominant.

This result is highly ironic, as well as controversial, because Baptists and other born-again Christians prominently emphasize marriage and family. But, even the often-repeated observation that Jesus forbade divorce does not enable these Bible-believing Christians to divorce less frequently than other Americans.

It seems that religion cannot be depended on to keep a marriage intact. So, what does?

It turns out that education is the best support for a long-lasting marriage. According to a study of marriages during the five years ending in 2010, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that women in a first marriage had a 78 percent probability of remaining married for 20 years if they had a bachelor's degree. If they had less education, the likelihood did not even reach 50 percent.

The results were only slightly less pronounced for men. Those with bachelor's degrees had a 65 percent probability of remaining married for 20 years, while those with less education had a 54 percent probability or below.

In a different approach to this question, a Pew analysis of 2008 data indicates that 62 percent of women with college degrees were married at age 30, while only 60 percent of those without degrees were wedded. And, of women aged 35-39, women without college degrees were 55 percent more likely to have divorced than those with college degrees (2.9 percent vs. 1.6 percent).

This study about education and the success of marriage cuts across all religions and denominations, and even applies to atheists. But, the important observation is this: If you are religious and want to fulfill your religion's or denomination's expectation of a lifelong marriage, you will increase your chances if you pursue higher education and get a bachelor's degree.