

What Science Is Learning about Religion's Role in Forming, Maintaining, and Transforming Family Relationships

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Common phrases such as “soul mate,” “sacred vows,” and “the miracle of birth” speak to the historical ties between faith and family in America. Self-help books and religious communities offer advice on how to draw on faith to build a healthy marriage and family. Yet social scientists have primarily focused on a “spirituality of me” rather than a “spirituality of us,” directing their attention toward personal health and well-being rather than family life. Few studies have asked family members specifically about their religious or spiritual beliefs and practices that concern their marriage or parenting. Nonetheless, researchers are beginning to explore religion and family life.

This paper summarizes what researchers are learning about the role of religion in marital and parent–child relationships, based on a review of scientific studies conducted from 1999 to 2009. The paper uses a conceptual framework of “relational spirituality” to sort research on faith and family into the three stages of forming, maintaining, and transforming family relationships.

The forming stage entails starting and structuring particular sets of family relationships. Within and across religious denominations, people hold conflicting theological stances about the creation of same-sex marriages, nontraditional gender roles, and nontraditional family units. Findings from the review indicate that religion plays a role in facilitating getting married, becoming a parent, and deciding on gender roles in the family.

The maintenance stage involves sustaining healthy dynamics in family relationships. Diverse faith communities promote similar virtues (e.g., love, commitment, sacrifice) for how family members should act to sustain healthy family relationships. Review findings indicate that religion contributes to maintaining family relationships by shaping marriages and parent–child relationships after they are formed and by lowering the risk of divorce, domestic violence, infidelity, and child abuse.

The transformation stage focuses on coping with family dysfunction that calls for major change in the structure or dynamics of family relationships. There are important differences in religious views about how to interpret and handle family dysfunction if it does occur. Findings from the review highlight the exceedingly limited scientific research available on the role of religion in transforming dysfunctional family relationships and helping people cope with family problems. In regard to divorce, however, initial research suggests that religion may decrease or increase emotional distress, depending on the situation.

In brief, this review shows that religion does matter in the creation and maintenance of family relationships. Across faith traditions, religion generally promotes family formation and prevents family difficulties. When family problems arise, however, faith has the potential to either reduce or exacerbate distress.