

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

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Note: References for specific studies conducted in the past decade to support the findings summarized in this paper can be found in Mahoney, A. (2009). Religion in the home 1999-2009: A relational spirituality perspective. Invited review under revision. *Journal of Marriage and Family*.

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"Soul mate." "Sacred vows." "The miracle of birth." "A family that prays together stays together." These commonplace phrases speak to entrenched historical ties between faith and family in America. Hundreds of self-help books and diverse 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 a "spirituality of us." In other words, most empirical attention has been directed toward personal health and well-being, rather than family life. This review paper 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 either to reduce or exacerbate distress.

"Religion" vs. "Spirituality:" Abstract definitions versus concrete data

It is important to recognize that controversy exists among social scientists about the best ways to define the complex domains of "religion" and "spirituality." This issue seems pressing given that 23% of young American adults now label themselves as "spiritual but not religious," with 55% calling themselves "religious and spiritual," and 8% saying they are "religious but not spiritual." Increasingly, these two abstract concepts have become polarized in both popular culture and scientific circles. "Being religious" tends to be portrayed as involving membership in a given religious community; adherence to institutional dogma, worship or rituals; and external pressure. Conversely, "being spiritual" tends to be framed as a personal connection to the sacred; a private search for enlightenment, purpose, meaning or virtues; and internal motivation.

Kenneth Pargament's popular definition of religion as a "search for significance in ways related to the sacred" offers one way to reconcile these divergent views. This definition recognizes that religion can serve many positive and negative psychological and social purposes. Yet perhaps first and foremost, religion is designed to facilitate people's spirituality, that is, their "search for the sacred," and no other social institution has the promotion of spirituality as its core mission.

When it comes to family relationships, debates over abstract definitions of religion versus spirituality turn out to be largely irrelevant since researchers have relied mostly on simple questions to assess these realms. About 75 to 85% of studies conducted in the past 30 years ask if a given family member endorses identifies with a particular religious tradition (e.g., 70-75% say Catholic or Protestant/Christian; 10-15% say none), attends religious services, or says that religion or spirituality is personally important. Very few studies have asked family members specifically about their religious/spiritual beliefs or practices about their marriage or parenting, or about "relational spirituality." Nonetheless, researchers are beginning to learn more about religion and family life. This essay summarizes findings from the past decade.

Relational spirituality: Organizing what we know for family relationships

To help readers digest findings on the many ways in which religion or spirituality matters, I differentiate three general stages of family relationships: (1) discovery - forming and structuring a particular set of family relationships, (2) maintenance - sustaining healthy dynamics in family relationships, and (c) transformation - coping with family dysfunction that calls for major change in the structure and/or dynamics of family relationships. I do this for three reasons. First, controversies in the broader culture about faith and family often seem to reflect underlying tensions over the perceived spiritual legitimacy about diverse family structures. Within and

across religious denominations, people hold conflicting theological stances about the creation of same-sex marriages, nontraditional gender roles, and nontraditional family units. Second, there are important differences in religious views about how to interpret and handle family dysfunction if it does occur. In particular, sensationalistic stories in the media about relatively rare instances of religious impulses fueling domestic violence or child physical abuse obscure clear evidence that greater religious involvement greatly lowers the risk of such behaviors. Third, it can be easy to lose sight of the fact that diverse faith communities promote similar virtues for how family members should act to sustain healthy family relationships (e.g., love, commitment, sacrifice). I hope to clarify the state of knowledge in this field by locating precisely where various scientific findings fit into a multi-dimensional framework of religion and family relationships.

Relational spirituality: Forming family relationships

Getting married. As was the case in prior generations, contemporary adults rank religious similarity as an important factor (12th out of 23) when searching for a spouse. Men and women express a similar desire for potential partners to identify with a religious tradition (e.g., "none," Catholic, Protestant). Couples also decide early in their courtship whether (non)religious compatibility matters. That is, the percentage of couples who have the same religious affiliation does not change across the stages of dating, being sexually intimate, cohabiting, or marrying. Conservative Protestants, Catholics, Latter Day Saints, and Jews are the most likely to marry partners from their tradition (50% to 65%). In addition, young adults who view religion as more important to their daily life and more often attend religious services are less likely to cohabit with a partner before or instead of having a wedding. Similarly, young adults from all denominations who see religion as highly important more often get married in their early

twenties. Higher religious attendance also increases the odds that unmarried, pregnant women will marry after giving birth. Analogously, gay and lesbian individuals who view religion as important more often engage in ritualized commitment ceremonies with same-sex partners. Overall, the exchange of sacred vows between couples rests more on personal religious engagement than nominal affiliation or participation in a faith tradition.

Becoming a mother. For centuries, religions have encouraged married couples to procreate. This message continues to sway young women. Those who view religion as important to their lives are more likely to give birth after age 24. This is consistent with diverse religious teachings that motherhood should be reserved for marriage. Further, women who say religion is unimportant are more likely to have unplanned births, especially during adolescence, or to remain childless into middle-age. Young women's plans to have children are also tied to greater importance of religion in their lives, regardless of how often they attend services or their particular faith tradition. In addition, this finding applies to women who do or do not hold socially conservative attitudes toward feminism or family life emphasized by some religious groups. Overall, young adult women who value their faith are more likely to have children and want to be mothers. Further efforts are needed, however, to pinpoint specific spiritual beliefs or practices centered on motherhood that motivate this life goal.

Becoming a father. Peer-reviewed research is unavailable on religion and rates of child parentage by young men. Researchers have sought to verify if fathers involved in conservative Protestant churches spend more time than other fathers with their children after they are born, rather than being distant or absent. Several studies have not found this to be the case with contemporary married men. In fact, unexpectedly, unmarried fathers are more likely to avoid

offspring born out of wedlock if they are conservative Protestants. On the other hand, across religious denominations, fathers who attend religious services more often are more likely to spend time playing with their biological children. This implies that more intensive religious involvement across the spectrum of religious traditions helps motivate fathers to invest time in creating father-child relationships.

Juggling gender roles at home and work. Modern couples face complex choices in deciding who does what in and out of the home. Many cannot afford for either spouse to be a full-time homemaker, and most wives are employed before and after having children. Thus, couples face a difficult juggling act in assigning the roles of breadwinner and homemaker. People raised in conservative Protestant or Muslim homes may be interested to learn that, nationally speaking, members their sub-cultures hold diverse values about how couples should negotiate such issues. That is, believers in pews hold more flexible attitudes about equality between spouses than sermons that portray husbands as having divinely sanctioned dominance over wives. Contrasting interpretations of the Bible in evangelical Christian circles urge husbands to devote more time to their "manly" segregated household tasks or to pull more weight across the board. Yet neither message seems to have hit home based on recent national data. Conservative Protestant wives do more of both traditional "female" and "male" housework than other wives, and conservative Protestant husbands exert the same effort as other husbands on both types of housework. Nevertheless, more progressive Christian couples are not markedly more egalitarian in marital decision-making. That is, as a group, conservative Protestants couples are equally likely as other couples to share decisions about financial matters, child rearing, and who should work outside the home. Thus, although more conservative Christian couples say they

believe more in traditional gender roles than mainline/liberal couples, the actions of both groups tell a different story. Also, religion does not seem to make a notable difference as to whether employed husbands or wives in recent generations invest more time in careers versus family life. Overall, further research is needed to uncover specific spiritual resources that could help couples combat financial pressures, careerism, or materialism, and instead "put families first."

Relational spirituality: Sustaining family relationships

Despite theological divisions within and across denominations about ideal family structures, most religious traditions encourage similar virtues (e.g., love, self-sacrifice, commitment) to facilitate the stability and health of family bonds. This section summarizes scientific findings on how faith could help people sustain the traditional or non-traditional family relationships they do create.

Enhancing marital quality. Higher marital satisfaction has been tied repeatedly to each spouse's general religiousness (affiliation, attendance) and husband-wife similarity on such factors. Emerging research offers insights into three specific and spiritual pathways to enhance marital dynamics. First, people can privately pray to God for the well-being of their romantic partner. Such activity predicts greater satisfaction with a relationship over time as well as selfless concern, gratitude, and forgiveness of partners. Second, spouses can view their marriage as having spiritual significance, either by viewing the union as having sacred qualities (e.g., is sacred; is part of a larger spiritual plan) or being a manifestation of God (e.g., God plays a role in; is a reflection of God's will). Several studies show that such beliefs predict more marital love, satisfaction, and constructive communication processes; such effects are not merely the result of other positive elements of the marriage or spouses' overall religious involvement. Third, couples

can engage in spiritual activities together (e.g., joint prayer or spiritual discussions). Such activity correlates with higher satisfaction and better communication. Analogously, college students and mothers who mutually discuss their spiritual journeys tend to have more harmonious relationships and resolve conflict collaboratively. Nevertheless, couples who deeply disagree in their interpretation of the Bible experience more conflict. Some family dyads also draw God into their conflicts as a third party. Married couples who do this say it often helps them to resolve conflict by encouraging mutual self-reflection, patience, empathy, and accountability. On the other hand, aligning with God against a partner in a spiritually one-up manner appears to escalate distance and conflict between family members, even if done unwittingly.

Decreasing the risk of domestic violence and sexual infidelity. According to multiple studies, more frequent attenders of religious services are much less likely than infrequent attenders to perpetrate, or to be the victim of, domestic violence in marital, cohabiting, or dating relationships. Further, contrary to simplistic stereotypes, being a conservative Protestant, biblically conservative, or in an interfaith marriage does not increase these risks. The only documented situation where religion systematically increases the odds of domestic violence is for the rare marriages (7.5%) where couples strongly disagree about the Bible. Here, biblically conservative men married to more liberal wives are more likely to be aggressive than men married to women with similar biblical views.

Individuals who more often attend religious services are also less likely to engage in extramarital affairs. But caveats do apply. The odds of infidelity paradoxically increase for high attenders who do not feel close to God and for low attenders who do feel close to God. Also,

purely private spiritual experiences (e.g., prayer, subjective spiritual growth) make no difference for the likelihood of having an affair. Thus, sexual fidelity seems to depend both on communal support for, and the internalization of, a spiritual commitment to fidelity. Emerging research also shows that viewing marital sexuality as sacred and connected to God enhances the sexual functioning of newlyweds. This suggests that certain spiritual beliefs can enrich young couples' sexual lives, not merely discourage infidelity.

Disciplining and nurturing children. Parents with conservative Christian identities (e.g., affiliation, Biblical conservatism) tend to spank children more than other parents, with one study suggesting this is particularly true if they strongly believe that parenting is a spiritual calling. In contrast, biblically liberal parents who strongly view parenting as a spiritual endeavor are less likely to spank. This does not mean, however, that conservative Christian parents are excessively harsh. In fact, in national surveys, they report yelling less and being more physically affectionate with their children than other parents. Further, in one in-depth study, conservative Protestant parents were no more likely to spank their preschoolers when stressed than other parents and were equally likely to use non-punitive disciplinary techniques. Further, conservative Protestant fathers report giving their children more affection and supervision than other fathers. Overall, conservative Protestant parents appear, on average, to blend firmness and warmth in child rearing in a manner consistent with their religious views of parenting and with the broad acceptance of spanking in American culture.

Much less is known about the ways religion may promote parenting by the 70 to 75% of Americans who do not identify with conservative Protestantism. Yet higher religious attendance and personal importance of God or spirituality has been repeatedly correlated with positive

parenting by mothers especially at risk of having difficulties. Namely, these factors predict more satisfaction, self-confidence, authoritativeness, and consistency in parenting as well as less parental distress for and risk of child abuse by young, single mothers with limited financial resources. Thus, young adults across faith traditions may benefit from learning how to rely on spirituality in healthy ways to help them cope with parenting challenges.

Risk of child physical abuse. Multiple peer-reviewed studies show that frequent religious attendance by parents substantially decreases their risk of being physically abusive to their children over time. Further, despite concerns that religiously conservative parents may justify child physical abuse on spiritual grounds, this question has not been directly studied. In a related study of college students (who were neither married nor parents), the estimated risk of being abusive was unrelated to any religious tradition, attendance, orthodoxy, or centrality of religion to daily life. Yet, those who merely exploited religion for self-centered purposes were at greater risk. Overall, parents who take their faith seriously are less likely to be physically abusive.

Relational spirituality: Coping with family problems

Because more religious individuals more often seek out and enjoy harmonious family relationships, they may be especially ill equipped to handle situations that violate their spiritual expectations of how to build and maintain family bonds. Virtually no research has been conducted, for instance, on spiritually-centered efforts to cope with a romantic partner who won't commit to marriage, out-of-wedlock birth, infidelity, domestic violence, or serious dysfunction in marital or parent-child relationships. Such situations may trigger spiritual struggles that contribute to personal and relationship distress. Or, spirituality may be a well-spring of resilience in times of family trouble. Religious organizations have tremendous potential

to help family members articulate and come to terms with ways that religion and spirituality can operate, for better or worse, when family crises strike home. Emerging research on divorce illustrates both types of roles.

Coping with divorce. Americans, particularly white women, who often attend religious services, and couples who are religiously similar are less likely to divorce in the future than others. Nevertheless, approximately 28% of Catholics, 34% of Protestants, and 33% of "born again" Christians have had a prior divorce. Thus, religion lowers divorce risk, but does not render immunity. This raises important questions about spiritually-centered coping and post-divorce adjustment. Initial research on this topic has found that divorcing adults as well as college students with divorced parents often interpret this event as the loss or violation of something sacred and experience spiritual struggles about it. Such spiritual distress uniquely exacerbates emotional distress. On the other hand, divorcing adults who more often turn to God and a spiritual community for support are less depressed over time. The picture is less clear for parental divorce. Young adults who recalled trying to use such spiritual resources at the time of the divorce reported current adjustment. National surveys also show that parental divorce triggers switching of denominations or disengagement from organized religion by offspring. Thus, the experience of divorce as a spiritual trauma merits far more attention.

Relational spirituality: Deepening our understanding of prevention and intervention

Overall, scientific evidence to date suggests that religion and spirituality tends to promote family formation and prevent family difficulties. Thus, scientifically speaking, it makes sense for people to seek out healthy ways to integrate their pursuit of spirituality and family relationships. Yet much empirical work remains to identify specific spiritual resources and struggles that could

impact family relationships, especially during times of family trouble. Hopefully, social scientists will build more collaborative relationships with diverse people of faith to develop family oriented programming that capitalizes on the unique resources, and addresses the special risks, embedded within a spirituality *of* marriage or parenting. The two major goals of this collaborative process would be to help individuals and their spiritual communities prevent family distress and intervene effectively when family crises do occur.

Selected Resources for Further Information

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