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Religion in Families, 1999–2009: A Relational Spirituality Framework

This review examines the role of religion, for better and worse, in marital and parent–child relationships according to peer-reviewed studies from 1999 to 2009. A conceptual framework of relational spirituality is used (a) to organize the breadth of findings into the 3 stages of formation, maintenance, and transformation of family relationships and (b) to illustrate 3 in-depth sets of mechanisms to delve into the ways religion shapes family bonds. Topics include union formation, fertility, spousal roles, marital satisfaction and conflict, divorce, domestic violence, infidelity, pregnancy, parenting children, parenting adolescents, and coping with family distress. Conclusions emphasize moving beyond markers of general religiousness and identifying specific spiritual beliefs and practices that prevent or intensify problems in traditional and nontraditional families.

Since the 1990s, scientific research has skyrocketed on how religion affects the well-being of individuals (Beckford & Demerath, 2007; Paloutzian & Parke, 2005) but not family relationships. This article aims to stimulate the breadth and depth of research on the interface of religion and family life. To that end, I located studies published in peer-reviewed journals from 1999 to 2009 in which religious variables were the primary predictors of family relationship criteria. I first sketch the contours and key conceptual limitations of this wide-ranging literature. There is ample room for diverse topics, theories, samples, and methods, but researchers interested in enriching knowledge about religion and family life may benefit from a broader, integrated perspective. Thus, I offer a relational spirituality framework to organize evidence that higher general religiousness of a given family member (e.g., attendance, importance) is tied to the formation and maintenance of family relationships and to highlight emerging research on specific spiritual mechanisms that help illuminate ways religion may shape family relationships, including those in distress. I hope to unite and mobilize social scientists to delve more deeply into the potentially helpful and harmful roles of religion in family relationships.

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Key Words: couples, family, marriage, parenting, religion, spirituality.

General Contours of Peer-Reviewed Studies in the Past Decade

Following an earlier meta-analysis spanning 1980 to 1999 (Mahoney, Pargament, Swank, & Tarakeshwar, 2001), I combined *religion* or *spirituality* with *marriage*, *parenting*, or *family* (six searches with pairs of key words) to locate empirical studies on religion and family life published in peer-reviewed journals from 1999 to 2009 and listed in the ISI and PsycINFO databases. I also examined the citation and reference lists of many studies. Here, I focus on studies that treated the functioning of family relationships as the outcome and religion as the predictor. I also discuss studies on spiritual

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coping with stressful family events (e.g., domestic violence, divorce). I do not discuss research on the intergenerational transmission or familial socialization of youth religiousness. Nor do I discuss how family members' religiousness affects nonfamilial relationships (e.g., peers) or their own and other family members' individual functioning (e.g., substance abuse, delinquency). Finally, because of space constraints, I do not cover spiritual coping with a relative's death or illness; related studies emphasize individual adjustment (e.g., physical health, depression), not familial outcomes.

Given these parameters, I located 184 studies (a list of all studies is located at my Web site at http: // www.bgsu.edu/departments/psych/page 33118.html). A table that describes the type and number of studies I located across various topics is posted in Appendix A, located at the *Journal of Marriage and Family* (*JMF*) Web site. I also posted Appendix B on the *JMF* Web site, which I cite in this essay for findings based on attitudinal measures or respondents who were not necessarily married or parents and for similar findings from two or more studies that used single-item measures of respondents' general religiousness. Thus, Appendix B points readers to studies that support statements I make but that I cannot exhaustively discuss or cite here.

I now summarize the descriptive characteristics of the 184 studies I located (see Table A, Appendix A). Of those, 57 quantitative studies and 23 qualitative studies addressed couples' relationships, and 80 and 24 studies dealt with parent – youth and family issues (e.g., divorce), respectively. Diverse issues were represented, including union formation; maternal fertility; paternal time with offspring; spousal egalitarianism; work – home balance; divorce risk; marital satisfaction; marital conflict; risk of domestic violence and infidelity; pregnancy; discipline, warmth, and physical abuse toward children; parenting style and relational quality with adolescents; domestic violence; and post-divorce adjustment. I found a limited number of studies on each topic (range of 4 – 20). Most of the 137 quantitative studies involved large U.S. national (52%) or community (34%) samples, so findings were not biased relative to the religious makeup of the United States; only 9% of studies involved non-U.S. samples. Of the studies, 77% (79% of marital and 76% of parent – youth) used one or two items to measure religious variables (e.g., affiliation, attendance, self-rated importance, biblical conservatism). Further, there was heavy reliance on the self-report of one family member rather than multiple family members for both religious and family variables. Direct observation of family interactions was limited to two studies on marital and eight on parent – youth dyads. In addition, most studies used cross-sectional (75%) rather than longitudinal designs (25%), which makes causal modeling difficult. Consistent with U.S. norms, most samples in quantitative studies were predominantly Christian, and few focused on ethnic minority families. Complementing this work were the 47 qualitative studies that tended to use smaller samples of highly religious families (51%) and more often involved participants with a U.S. ethnic or religious minority background (e.g., Latter-Day Saint, Jewish, Muslim).

This sketch shows that, although the quantity of research on faith and family has increased since the 1980s and 1990s, the area deserves more attention given the salience of religion and spirituality in the United States and in many other societies. For instance, about 65% of Americans label themselves ''religious and spiritual,'' 15% – 20% call themselves ''spiritual but not religious,'' and 5% – 10% say they are ''religious but not spiritual'' (Marler & Hadaway, 2002). Yet a central challenge for future research is to move beyond such global descriptors of religion and clarify particular aspects of religion that matter, for better and worse, in family life. Uncovering specific spiritual beliefs and practices centered on family relationships offers two major advantages over relying on global measures of a given family member's religiousness (e.g., affiliation, attendance).

First, global indices of individual religiousness yield small between-group differences and reveal little about the conceptually unique functions of religion for families. Research on divorce is a case in point. Although Americans who attend services frequently are less likely to divorce in the future than nonattenders, the average effect size for such a link is underwhelming ($r = .125$; Mahoney et al., 2001). Further, sizable percentages of religiously affiliated people have experienced a prior divorce; the Barna Group (2009) reported that 28% of Catholics, 34% of Protestants, and 33% of born-again Christians in the United States have had a prior divorce. Fine-grained and conceptually based measures of spiritual beliefs

and practices centered on marriage could better illuminate what aspects of religion help couples stay together. For instance, religious affiliation or nonaffiliation and attendance imply that individuals rely on a felt connection with God or on a religious group to reinforce spiritual beliefs and rituals about marriage that help prevent divorce. Yet global religious indices signal other functions of religion for marriage that have little to do with spiritual beliefs or practices that religious institutions foster. This ambiguity muddles interpretations as to why general religiousness is tied to lower future divorce and other family outcomes, and particularly whether such effects stem from spiritual resources or struggles.

Second, greater use of specific constructs that yield nuanced findings about the benefits and costs of religion for traditional and nontraditional families across diverse subpopulations could enhance public discourse about faith and family life. Better differentiated findings could increase the credibility of evidence that certain manifestations of religion are generally adaptive and offer greater insight into highly publicized cases, but relatively rare instances, of religious impulses gone awry (e.g., scriptural justifications for family violence). Attention to both beneficial and risky manifestations of religion within and across religious and demographic groups could also decrease simplistic conclusions about the merits or costs of an affiliation with a faith tradition. Finally, more specific data could better educate the public and religious organizations about how to use religion to prevent family difficulties and intervene effectively when problems do emerge.

Relational Spirituality Framework: Basic Ingredients

For this essay, I developed a relational spirituality framework to meet two general goals: (a) to provide perspective on the breadth of religion–family findings from the past decade and (b) to help stimulate in-depth questions that have been asked or could be asked about religion's roles in family life (Table 1). Regarding the first goal, the framework discriminates three stages of family relationships over time: (a) formation, or the creation and structure of family relationships; (b) maintenance, or processes to conserve family relationships; and (c) transformation, or fundamental changes in the structure or processes of distressed family relationships. The three stages differentiate family topics that do (formation) and do not (maintenance) tend to engender major theological controversies across and within religious groups. Findings on formation include creating marital and parent–child relationships and structuring spousal roles in the family. Findings on maintenance include religion's role in sustaining socially desirable family processes and lowering the risk of divorce, domestic violence, infidelity, and child abuse. As Table 1 indicates, evidence suggests that markers of greater religiousness facilitate the formation of traditional family ties and the maintenance of traditional or nontraditional family relationships, but scarce research exists on how religion may help or harm when family distress occurs.

For the second goal, the framework discriminates three sets of spiritual mechanisms for substantive integration of religion, for better or worse, into family relationships: (a) family member(s) relying on a relationship with the divine, (b) a family relationship being cognitively or behaviorally invested with spiritual properties, and (c) family member(s) relying on relationships with spiritual communities. Consistent with the definition of spirituality here, these mechanisms are labeled ''spiritual'' because they may or may not be closely tied to involvement in institutional religion. The specific cognitions and behaviors manifested in the mechanisms determine whether they are likely to help or harm relational (and individual) functioning. As Table 1 indicates, most current research on such mechanisms falls under maintenance, although those mechanisms could also apply to the formation and transformation stages. With this outline in mind, I offer a working definition of spirituality and its ties to religion. I then review research findings that correspond to the stages of formation, maintenance, and transformation of family relationships, followed by illustrative findings on each of the three sets of relational spiritual mechanisms.

For the purpose of this framework, I define spirituality as the search for the sacred (Pargament & Mahoney, 2002). In brief, the core of the sacred involves perceptions of the divine, God, or transcendent reality, but it may extend any aspect of life that takes on divine character and significance by virtue of its association with the core (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). Thus, individuals can experience family relationships

Table 1. *Relational Spirituality Framework*

Markers & Mechanisms – Addresses Depth of Religious Predictors		Stages of Family Relationships Over Time: Addresses Breadth of Family Criterion		
		Formation of family ties Criterion: Union formation, maternal fertility, paternal time with offspring, spousal roles in family	*Maintenance of Family Ties* Criterion: Marital satisfaction & conflict; risk of divorce, domestic violence, infidelity, child physical abuse; quality of parenting practices, adolescent-parent relationships	*Transformation of Distressed Family Ties* Criterion: Coping with unwanted singlehood, divorce, domestic violence, infertility, infidelity, child abuse, dysfunctional family relationships
		Illustrative Findings and Examples of Future Research Questions		
1 or 2 item markers of spiritual mechanisms	Predictors: Religious attendance or general importance of religion	Increases likelihood of marriage instead of cohabitation, at younger ages & after childbirth; women wanting & having children; & married men spending time with offspring	Increases marital satisfaction & lowers risk of divorce, marital conflict, infidelity, domestic violence, child physical abuse, positive parenting practices by married & single parents, & quality of parent – adolescent relationships	Almost no research with distressed or clinic-referred samples
	Biblical conservatism	Plays no clear role in shaping egalitarian marital roles by spouses or time spouses devote to family life versus paid work	Increases marital conflict if spouses differ greatly Increases parental supervision, affection, & spanking of children	
Relational spiritual mechanisms: Content of specific beliefs & practices determines if the constructs help or harm	Family member(s) relationship with the divine	Helpful mechanisms: Studies needed (e.g., seeking God's guidance in finding a marital partner or having a baby)	Praying to God for a romantic partner's well-being is tied to higher relational quality	Perceived support from the divine is linked to better postdivorce adjustment for adults
		Harmful mechanisms: Studies needed (e.g., feeling angry at God about singlehood or infertility)	Privately turning to God to avoid openly addressing marital unhappiness can undermine marital functioning	Struggles with the divine predict worse postdivorce adjustment

Table 1. *Continued*

Markers & Mechanisms – Addresses Depth of Religious Predictors	Stages of Family Relationships Over Time: Addresses Breadth of Family Criterion		
	Formation of family ties Criterion: Union formation, maternal fertility, paternal time with offspring, spousal roles in family	*Maintenance of Family Ties* Criterion: Marital satisfaction & conflict; risk of divorce, domestic violence, infidelity, child physical abuse; quality of parenting practices, adolescent-parent relationships	*Transformation of Distressed Family Ties* Criterion: Coping with unwanted singlehood, divorce, domestic violence, infertility, infidelity, child abuse, dysfunctional family relationships
	Illustrative Findings and Examples of Future Research Questions		
Family relationship invested with spiritual properties	Helpful mechanisms: Studies needed (e.g., creating wedding vows that have spiritual meaning)	Viewing marriage or parenting as sacred & open spiritual dialogue between family members correlates with better relational functioning	Studies needed (marriage as sacred may motivate positive change)
	Harmful mechanisms: Studies needed (e.g., viewing one's nonmarital birth as not spiritually legitimate)	Aligning with God against a family member during conflicts is tied to more negative communication skills	Viewing divorce as a sacred loss & desecration of a marriage is tied to poorer postdivorce adjustment
Family members(s) relationship with a spiritual community	Helpful mechanisms: Studies needed (e.g., having clergy invest one's marital union with spiritual significance)	Studies needed (e.g., obtaining support for helpful spiritual beliefs & behaviors about parenting)	Perceived support from community is tied to leaving or reconciling w/ abusive spouse.
	Harmful mechanisms: Studies needed (e.g., having clergy refuse a religious wedding for one's interfaith union)	Studies needed (e.g., having spiritual community take sides in family conflicts on spiritual grounds)	Studies needed (e.g., a spiritual community may reinforce harsh parenting of clinic-referred youth)

(Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003) and other domains of life (e.g., career, community work, nature) (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005) as part of the sacred. An individual's search includes three dynamic and recursive stages of the discovery, maintenance, and transformation of the sacred across the life span (Pargament, 2007). Discovery refers to proactively arriving at an understanding of what and how the sacred operates. Maintenance involves seeking ways to conserve one's experience of the sacred during daily life and times of stress. Transformation refers to seeking out fundamentally different ways of experiencing the sacred, typically prompted by major life transitions or crises.

Spirituality is conceptualized here as a distinctive function of religion, with religion defined as a search for significance in ways related to the sacred (Pargament, 1997; Pargament & Mahoney, 2002). This definition of religion encompasses the many constructive and destructive functions that religious beliefs, practices, and communal affiliation serve besides fostering spirituality. Positive and negative functions of religion include enabling the pursuit of goals that are psychological (e.g., anxiety reduction, meaning, rigid certitude), social (e.g., support, control, or dominance), or physical (e.g., longevity, financial abundance, self-annihilation) (Pargament, 1997, 2007). Although some scholars disassociate spirituality from religion, in this framework, spirituality is a unique objective of both personal and institutional forms of religion. This approach is sufficiently broad to encompass unconventional pathways people take outside of organized religion and well-worn pathways pursued in organized religion to inform their spiritual journeys. It also keeps attention focused on what makes religious institutions unique—namely no other social organizations promote spirituality as a central goal. In summary, the relational spirituality framework elaborates the multidimensional interface between the search for the sacred and the search for relationships. Given space constraints and the emphasis I place on spiritual mechanisms in this review, I refer readers elsewhere to discussions on possible nonspiritual mechanisms triggered by religion that may facilitate family functioning (Dollahite & Marks, 2009; Edgell, 2005; Mahoney et al., 2001; Wilcox, 2004, 2006).

Relational Spirituality: Formation of Family Relationships

Overview. I begin with an overview about the theoretical emphasis in the past decade in the social sciences on religion and the formation of family relationships. Despite growing pluralism in contemporary family structures, scholarly discussions of religion and family have focused on the interdependence of traditional manifestations of these two institutions (Edgell, 2005; Wilcox, 2006). The term *religious familism* refers to the ideology that the family is the precious central unit of social order and should be governed by religious moral imperatives (Edgell, 2003, 2005; Wilcox, 2004). Scholars have thus emphasized the potential influence of religious messages about pronuptiality, pronatalism, and distinctive family roles for men and women promoted by mainline religions, particularly by conservative branches of American Protestantism (e.g., Edgell, 2005; Gallagher, 2003; Wilcox, 2004; Xu, Hudspeth, & Bartkowski, 2005). This scholarship has articulated how traditional religious doctrines often idealize and reinforce American, middle-class, and mid-20th century views of the ''good'' family, which consists of heterosexual married couples with children (Edgell, 2005; Edgell & Docka, 2007). Indeed, findings have suggested that religion promotes the formation of traditional family ties, such as marriage rather than cohabitation and marital rather than nonmarital births. Yet most findings on formation have involved single-item measures of religiousness (e.g., attendance, salience). This precludes clear interpretations of the underlying spiritual or nonspiritual mechanisms that account for linkages. Further, the conceptual lens of religious familism implies that religion is primarily, perhaps exclusively, relevant to traditional family relationships. Little work has been done on what roles religion may play in the formation of nontraditional family relationships, such as same-sex unions or single parenthood. Hopefully, the next decade of research will shine more light on such links. I now review key findings on the role of religion in forming familial ties. Given space constraints, I selectively discuss specific studies, and I abbreviate the terms *conservative Protestant* and *Latter-Day Saint* as CP and LDS, respectively.

Union formation. Religion is a relevant factor in seeking a spouse (Appendix B). In a cross-national study, men and women ranked religious

similarity around 12th in importance of 23 factors that influence mate preferences, with lower rankings for same-sex couples. National surveys of U.S. college students have indicated that the relative importance of a potential partner's religiousness has been consistent for the past 50 years, with men and women equally preferring similarity in the presence versus absence and type of religious affiliation. Still CPs in the United States more strongly desire similarity in affiliation than mainline Protestants when dating, and CPs, along with Catholics, LDSs, and Jews, are most likely to marry within affiliation (50%–65%) (Sherkat, 2004). A log-linear model study found that couples decided early in courtship whether they would be religiously similar, and the rigor of that sorting process did not vary across the stages of dating, being sexually intimate, cohabiting, or marrying (Blackwell & Lichter, 2004).

After adults establish an intimate relationship, they make choices about its structure. General religious involvement promotes getting married. For example, U.S. adolescents from CP or LDS families, particularly girls, as well as any teen who views religion as highly important, more frequently marry by age 23 (Uecker & Stokes, 2008). Effects of religious affiliation on earlier marriage timing also hold for Catholics and mainline Protestants, whereas Jews, liberal Protestants, and the unaffiliated tend to delay marriage (e.g., Xu et al., 2005). Wilcox and Wolfinger (2007) found that religious attendance increased marriage rates following a nonmarital birth. Mothers' beliefs in marriage, rather than other aspects of the relationship (e.g., affection or domestic violence), mediated this longitudinal effect, which implies that certain spiritual beliefs about marriage may increase a mother's desire to marry, particularly if her spiritual network reinforces her views. Analogously, another study found that gays and lesbians who viewed religion as important more often held ritualized commitment ceremonies with same-sex partners and established legal ties (e.g., wills, joint property) if involved in a supportive spiritual community (Oswald, Goldberg, Kuvalanka, & Clausell, 2008). Future research can help pinpoint the spiritual mechanisms that underlie union formation.

In deciding whether to cohabit before or in lieu of marriage, religious attendance and the salience of religion in daily life seem to matter, not religious affiliation (Appendix B). For instance, although Eggebeen and Dew (2009) showed that CP teens in the United States are less likely to cohabit than nonaffiliated youth, their cohabitation rates as they age are no different from those of mainline Protestants or non-Catholic groups and are greater than those of Catholics. In all religious groups, youths who are high in attendance and importance of religion cohabit less than those who are low in both factors. Specific spiritual mechanisms that cut across denominations for young adults are unstudied, as are links between religion and decisions to cohabit in middle to late adulthood.

Maternal fertility. For centuries, religions have encouraged married couples to procreate. Today, this message continues to sway American women. Specifically, although maternal fertility rates on the basis of 2002 national data did not differ by affiliation with a predominant religious group (i.e., 90.5% classified as Catholic, fundamentalist Protestant, or other Protestant) or religious attendance (Zhang, 2008), the personal importance of religion was tied to higher fertility, especially for women older than age 24, but not for younger women (Hayford & Morgan, 2008; Zhang, 2008). These results fit with religious proscriptions to delay procreation until marriage. Further, older U.S. women (age 35–44) for whom religion was personally irrelevant in 2002 were more likely to report that they had voluntarily chosen to be childless (Abma & Martinez, 2006). Finally, women who had unintended births more often reported that religion was unimportant to them (Hayford & Morgan, 2008).

Why might the personal salience of religion intensify the desire for motherhood? One possibility is that women adopt socially conservative attitudes about family life via exposure to traditional religious doctrine (Appendix B). Yet after controlling conservative attitudes about family life, greater importance of religion still predicts U.S. women's plans to have children; affiliation and attendance also do not influence their fertility intentions beyond, or in combination with, religious importance (Hayford & Morgan, 2008). Thus, specific spiritual beliefs that overlap with women's involvement in religious social networks may motivate their desires to have biological children. Remarkably, I located only one study on religion and adoption as a pathway to parenthood (Hollingsworth, 2000). Greater importance of religion emerged as a strong factor tied to adoption by U.S. women

out of a host of other motivations and fertility issues. No studies exist on how religion shapes decisions to use reproductive technology to assist in becoming a married or single mother. Clearly, much remains to be learned about spiritual mechanisms that promote the formation of a mother – child relationship.

Paternal time with children. Virtually no research exists on religion's role in men wanting or fathering biological children; however, researchers have repeatedly examined whether fathers involved in CP churches invest more time than other men in forming a relationship with their children after they are born rather than being distant or absent fathers. Verification of this premise remains elusive. Wilcox (2002) found that CP and Catholic fathers who were, on average, 36 years old in 1987 – 1988 spent more time with their children in 1992 – 1993 engaging in leisure activities than did unaffiliated or mainline Protestant fathers and in mealtime or organized activities (e.g., Scouts) than nonaffiliated fathers. Yet five other large, rigorous studies of fathers failed to link a CP identity to the amount of time that married fathers devoted to child care, one-on-one activities, supportive dialogue, or playtime (Appendix B). Moreover, Wildeman (2008) found that unmarried CP fathers spent far less time than other unmarried fathers from urban areas playing with their young children. Of course, diverse religious groups encourage men to view fatherhood as a sacred role, so religious attendance, not affiliation, may be key. Indeed, on the basis of 1987 national data, attendance correlated more strongly with paternal time than CP affiliation and mediated links between CP affiliation and father involvement (Bartkowski & Xu, 2000; Wilcox, 2002). Further, paternal religious attendance by urban and disproportionally unmarried fathers at the time of their child's birth predicted more future playtime, and postpartum declines in attendance predicted less playtime (Petts, 2007). Yet higher attendance decreased the odds that unmarried fathers resided with their children (Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008). Obviously, more work is needed to specify the spiritual mechanisms that motivate married and unmarried men to invest time in forming father – child relationships. Further, research is needed for the neglected but critical questions of whether spirituality fosters maternal time with children or the amount of time either parent devotes to childrearing roles besides companionship. (Findings on the quality of parenting, not quantity of parental time, are reviewed in the Maintenance section.)

Attitudes about family roles of men and women. Forming family relationships involves decisions about the roles that men and women will play across the family life cycle. To date, sociological theories on religion primarily address how conservative religious subcultures may reinforce traditional attitudes about spousal roles in households of married heterosexuals with children. Indeed, Protestant and Islamic leaders of fundamentalist or Evangelical groups promote traditional spousal roles in the family on doctrinal grounds (Appendix B). Yet Muslims and CPs living in the United States hold far more diverse and flexible attitudes about feminism, women's labor market participation, and familial hierarchy than implied by conservative religious teachings about divinely sanctioned dominance by husbands over wives or popular media stereotypes about those subcultures (Appendix B). Thus, I highlight links between religion and behavioral indices, rather than attitudinal markers, of how men and women fulfill spousal roles.

Division of domestic labor and decision making. Analyses of popular writings and elite discourse in the CP subculture and qualitative interviews with married CP couples reveal diverse beliefs about spousal roles for household tasks (Ellison & Bartkowski, 2002; Gallagher, 2003). Contrasting interpretations of the Bible urge husbands to devote more time to their segregated household tasks or pull more weight across the board. Neither message has hit home according to recent national data. In general, CP wives perform more of both traditionally feminine and masculine housework tasks than do non-CP wives, and CP husbands exert the same effort on both types of housework as other husbands (Ellison & Bartkowski, 2002). When it comes to marital decision making, CP and non-CP American couples report being equally egalitarian in decisions about financial matters, childrearing, and who should work outside the home, despite the fact that both groups express attitudes that contradict their actions (Denton, 2004). Thus, it is unclear what, if any, specific spiritual beliefs or practices impact the division of household labor.

Time spent on family versus paid work. Mixed evidence exists as to whether religion shapes

wives' decisions to be full-time homemakers. American women born around 1948 who endorsed fundamentalist views of the Bible as high school seniors were more likely to become full-time homemakers or leave the work force upon having children and later reenter employment (Sherkat, 2000). Using a 2000 national sample of 501 middle-aged Arab American women (50% Christian, and 45% Muslim), Read (2004) found that more religious women were less likely to be employed, but only if they had children at home. In contrast, according to 1996 national data, recent generations of CP mothers of young children were not more likely to drop out of the work force than other mothers (Ammons & Edgell, 2007).

Behaviorally based evidence is also mixed as to whether religion helps employed men or women prioritize family over career. Using national data from 1988 to 1993, one study found that White women affiliated with a fundamentalist religious group worked fewer hours after marriage or a marital birth, particularly if married to a coreligionist, and they switched to lower-paying, less prestigious jobs if they strongly endorsed fundamentalist beliefs (Glass & Nath, 2006). In contrast, Black fundamentalist women increased work hours after a marital birth. Thus, White fundamentalist wives may feel more secure in risking career advancement, despite their equal chances of eventually divorcing (Glass & Nath, 2006). Ammons and Edgell (2007) found in a 1996 national sample that higher attendance marginally predicted men and women reducing work hours and attending more family events. Unexpectedly, CP women missed more family events and CP men accepted more promotions, although the effect was reversed if men frequently attended church. Yet according to 1988 and 1993 national surveys, fundamentalist husbands did not forgo paid labor to invest more in household tasks than other husbands, even if they were frequent church attenders (Civettini & Glass, 2008). These inconclusive findings highlight the need to identify specific spiritual mechanisms that may help men and women combat financial pressures, careerism, or materialism so they put families first.

Spiritual legitimacy of diverse family forms. During the 20th century, theologians developed justifications for and against nontraditional family forms, such as same-sex marriages and single or adoptive parenthood (Edgell, 2005, 2007; Onedera, 2008; Ruether, 2000). Christian laypeople also hold divergent views about the spiritual legitimacy of unconventional family units (Jensen, 2006). Yet almost no research has examined individuals' spiritual appraisals of their own nontraditional family systems and relational risks of violating spiritual values about family structure. Future studies may reveal painful, irreconcilable divisions about the family forms that people within and across religious subcultures affirm as sacred. For example, in two studies using qualitative interview methods, nearly all same-sex couples ($n = 14$) from the southern United States said their union had divine significance and meaning (Rostosky, Riggle, Brodnicki, & Olson, 2008), whereas heterosexuals from the region who formed a covenant marriage ($n = 22$) viewed their nonegalitarian spousal roles as a service to God (Baker, Sanchez, Nock, & Wright, 2009). Bringing to light such contrasts could facilitate constructive interfaith dialogue in families and society, including with nonbelievers who may object to religious rituals, beliefs, or communities that invest any type of family unit with spiritual meaning and significance.

Relational Spirituality: Maintenance of Family Relationships Stage

Overview. Whereas considerable theological conflict exists within and across religious groups about the formation of nontraditional family relationships, diverse faith traditions agree that family members should treat one another in ways that maintain the quality and stability of the family relationships they create. Endorsement of virtues, such as being loving, unselfish, committed, and ethical, cut across religions (Onedera, 2008). This section summarizes empirical evidence linking religion to marital and parent–child processes and relational outcomes.

Divorce rates. As in prior decades (Mahoney et al., 2001), three recent longitudinal studies tied higher religious attendance, particularly by wives or by couples who attend the same denomination together, to decreased rates of future divorce (Brown, Orbuch, & Bauermeister, 2008; Vaaler, Ellison, & Powers, in press; Woods & Emery, 2002). Null findings emerged for personal importance of religion, affiliation, or spousal similarity in affiliation using two nationally representative samples (Vaaler et al.,

in press; Woods & Emery, 2002). The results imply that greater depth of integration into a spiritual community can help prevent divorce, but spouses cannot be too divergent here. A much greater risk of divorce exists for mixed faith couples when husbands attend religious services more often than wives and when wives are more conservative in their biblical beliefs or Christian affiliation than husbands (Vaaler et al., in press). Divorce risk may thus increase when a less religiously committed spouse resists the spiritual expectations of a spouse or spiritual community, though more research is needed to verify such speculations.

Marital satisfaction and commitment. In prior decades, spouses' general religiousness consistently covaried with marital satisfaction and commitment (Mahoney et al., 2001), but recent longitudinal findings using such indices have been mixed. For instance, a longitudinal study using 172 newlyweds from Los Angeles County yielded only two unexpected findings (Sullivan, 2001). First, greater religiousness of newlywed husbands improved subjective marital satisfaction if they were psychologically well adjusted, but exacerbated marital distress if they were emotionally fragile. Second, although both newlyweds' religiousness covaried with antidivorce and procommitment attitudes, these attitudinal findings did not forecast observations of marital interactions or self-reported marital quality. Furthermore, only wives', not husbands', global religiousness predicted marital stability for 100 Caucasian and highly educated couples followed from 1980 to 1993 (Clements, Stanley, & Markman, 2004). Conversely, in two large samples of disproportionally low income and minority couples living in urban areas in the late 1990s, higher attendance by men, but not women, predicted the future satisfaction for both coparents in cohabiting or married unions (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008; Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008). The mixed findings underscore the need to uncover spiritual mechanisms centered on marriage that matter for both spouses. For example, viewing one's marriage as sanctified predicts greater marital satisfaction and commitment for wives and husbands. Such results emerged after controlling for general religiousness and unmeasured attributes of couples from a national sample (Lichter & Carmalt, 2009) and a community sample (Mahoney et al., 1999). For married and pregnant couples from a midsize, Midwestern community, higher sanctification of marriage also diminished typical linkages found between lower marital quality and perceived inequity in the marriage, including perceiving oneself as unfairly giving to or receiving more from one's spouse (DeMaris, Mahoney, & Pargament, in press).

Assessing dyadic religiousness is another way to move beyond a given spouse's general religiousness. Myers (2006) found that spousal similarity in attendance related to marital satisfaction and stability in national surveys from 1980 and 1997, but the effect weakened over time. Similarity in global religiousness also continued to predict marital satisfaction for older, but not younger, U.S. couples (Myers, 2006). Such generational shifts reinforce the value of in-depth indices of shared spiritual rituals because they predict marital quality better than global markers of individual (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001; Mahoney et al., 1999) or dyadic religiousness (Lichter & Carmalt, 2009). Further, the perceived meaning of shared spiritual rituals, not merely their frequency, is important to marital satisfaction (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001; Marks, 2004).

Marital conflict and resolution. Contrary to the idea that more religious people tolerate greater marital conflict because of absolute commitment to the marriage, greater general religiousness is inversely or unrelated to more frequent conflict (Curtis & Ellison, 2002; Mahoney et al., 2001). Nevertheless, according to recent national data, spousal dissimilarity in religious attendance and biblical interpretations predicts more arguing, particularly over money and housework (Curtis & Ellison, 2002). Further, although U.S. couples rarely hold polarized views of the Bible, when the wife is much more biblically conservative, they disagree more often about in-laws and how to spend time; when the husband is much more biblically conservative, they argue more about childrearing (Curtis & Ellison, 2002). Qualitative work with small samples also suggests having children increases tension for interfaith couples because coparenting accentuates spiritually based differences in parents' values and socialization practices (e.g., McCarthy, 2007).

Diverse religious traditions offer couples spiritual resources to resolve the inevitable conflicts that arise in marriage (Mahoney, 2005). Several descriptive studies using community or highly religious samples have found that each spouse may turn to a deity (e.g., private prayer),

a spiritual community (e.g., fellow believers, clergy), or spiritual beliefs about marriage (e.g., sanctification) to motivate constructive resolution of marital conflict (Appendix B). In fact, recent research highlights the role of prayer to manage conflict. Married people report that praying to a deity about their conflicts increases their sense of responsibility for self-change; reduces emotional negativity; and facilitates perspective taking, empathy, gentle confrontation, and problem solving (e.g., Butler, Stout, & Gardner, 2002). Such claims dovetail with findings that better communication dynamics are tied to benevolent prayer by college students for a partner's well-being (e.g., Fincham, Beach, Lambert, Stillman, & Braithwaite, 2008) and to shared spiritual activities and the sanctification of marriage by married couples in a national sample (Lichter & Carmalt, 2009) and a community sample (Mahoney et al., 1999). Qualitative interviews with Catholic couples, however, indicate that use of private prayer can go awry if a spouse detours anger toward a spouse onto God as a maladaptive avoidance strategy (Marsh & Dallos, 2000). Initial studies also suggest that attempts by one or both spouses to align with God against each other to win verbal disagreement can be destructive (Gardner, Butler, & Seedall, 2008).

Domestic violence risk. According to national surveys, men and women who frequently attend religious services are about half as likely as nonattenders to perpetrate physical aggression against intimate partners, according to both partners (Appendix B). This link persists net of the offender's social integration and support, alcohol and substance abuse, and low self-esteem and depression (Ellison & Anderson, 2001). More frequent attenders also report less often being a victim of partner aggression in marital, cohabiting, or dating relationships (Appendix B). Further, being a CP or biblically conservative does not predict being a perpetrator or victim, nor does having an interfaith marriage. Still, in the rare cases (7.5%) in which marked disparities exist in spouses' biblical beliefs, conservative men married to more liberal women are more likely to be aggressive than men married to women with similar biblical views (Ellison, Bartkowski, & Anderson, 1999). Overall, higher religious attendance decreases the risk of exhibiting or experiencing domestic violence, although substantial disagreement between partners on spiritual matters may increase the risk of partner aggression.

Marital infidelity and sexuality. In qualitative research, highly religious couples report that feeling close to God, viewing marriage as sanctified, and being involved in a spiritual community increase the value of and commitment to sexual fidelity (Dollahite & Lambert, 2007). Indeed, frequent religious attendance, a marker of all of these mechanisms, is tied to lower self-reported extramarital sex in national surveys (Appendix B). Qualifications nevertheless apply. Higher attendance may not curb infidelity for unhappy spouses who are most likely to stray (Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobson, 2001). Further, the odds of an affair paradoxically increase for high attenders who do not feel close to God and for low attenders who do feel close to God (Atkins & Kessel, 2008). This implies that communal reinforcement of internalized spiritual beliefs about marriage is key for sexual fidelity. In fact, infidelity is least likely for Christians who are strongly attached to their tradition of choice, with no reliable differences between denominations (Burdette, Ellison, Sherkat, & Gore 2007; Cochran, Chamlin, Beeghley, & Fenwick, 2004). Moreover, private spiritual experiences (e.g., prayer, subjective spiritual growth) are unrelated to infidelity (Atkins & Kessel, 2008). Finally, an initial study on the sanctification of marital sexuality with newlyweds from the Midwest found that such beliefs enhanced the couples' sexual functioning cross-sectionally and longitudinally (Hernandez & Mahoney, 2009). Thus, certain spiritual factors may enrich couples' sexual lives and not merely discourage infidelity.

Pregnancy and infants: Parenting processes and maternal adjustment. Beyond whether religion affects maternal decisions to bear children or paternal time spent with infants (see the ''Formation'' section), questions remain about parental efforts to sustain a healthy parent – child bond during pregnancy and infancy. Qualitative work reveals that women often view pregnancy as spiritually significant and turn to the divine or faith communities to cope with the event (e.g., Jesse, Schoneboom, & Blanchard, 2007). Indirect evidence suggests that such processes may facilitate maternal self-care during pregnancy. Namely, in a national survey and several studies of low income and minority pregnant women, greater

public religious participation and subjective spirituality have been tied to less smoking and higher smoking cessation during pregnancy and to less prenatal and postpartum maternal depression and pregnancy anxiety (Appendix B). Importantly, these links persist after controlling demographics and social support, which suggests that more research is needed on spiritual mechanisms that may facilitate maternal self-care during pregnancy. I found no studies on how religion may help or hinder the quality of parental care of infants by either mothers or fathers.

Children: Parenting Processes

Disciplinary attitudes. Multiple studies conducted from 1980 to 1999 established that CPs more often value children's obedience than do adults affiliated with no or other religious subgroups (Mahoney et al., 2001). Further, according to national U.S. surveys, frequent churchgoing CPs increasingly came to value children's obedience over autonomy from 1986 to 2002, and CPs desired obedience more than Catholics, mainline Protestants, or nonaffiliated people (Starks & Robinson, 2005, 2007). Nevertheless, differences in Christian subgroups on moral cosmology were far more important in predicting disciplinary values than differences between religious subgroups. In all religious subgroups, including CPs, members who more strongly endorsed the theologically orthodox position that individuals were subject to timeless divine law more strongly valued children's obedience than fellow members who leaned toward a modernist view that individuals, not a deity, are the ultimate arbiters of morality (Starks & Robinson, 2007). Also, according to 1998 national data, merely being a CP was unrelated to support for corporal punishment, whereas hierarchical images of God and belief in hell strongly predicted this attitude, ever after controlling sociopolitical conservatism (Ellison & Bradshaw, 2009).

Disciplinary practices. Perhaps in light of consistent evidence from 1980 to 1999 that CPs more often spank young children than do non-CP parents (Mahoney et al., 2001), researchers in the past decade have further examined ways that religion shapes various disciplinary practices of parents. In a small Midwestern sample of married parents, higher sanctification of parenting was tied to greater use of reasoning and positive socialization techniques (e.g., praise) to elicit young children's moral conduct in disciplinary situations but not to punitive techniques (e.g., shaming or spanking) (Volling, Mahoney, & Rauer, 2009). In another community sample, higher sanctification of parenting was linked to less spanking by biblically liberal mothers, though more spanking by biblical conservatives (Murray-Swank, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2006). Biblically conservative parents cannot, however, be assumed to be excessively harsh. In fact, in a national survey, such parents reported yelling at their children less often than other parents (Bartkowski & Wilcox, 2000). In addition, an in-depth comparison of parents affiliated with CP versus non-CP denominations (or none) in a southwestern U.S. sample found that CP parents were no more likely to spank preschoolers when stressed and equally likely to use nonpunitive, disciplinary techniques (Gershoff, Miller, & Holden, 1999). Still, CP parents more strongly believed that spanking was necessary to gain obedience and reported fewer negative side effects of this method for themselves (guilt) or their children (fear, anger). Such beliefs mediated the links between CP affiliation and spanking (Gershoff et al., 1999). Overall, evidence suggests that a constellation of spiritual beliefs consistent with a CP schema about parenting may motivate thoughtful, calm, and consistent use of corporal punishment, and other spiritual views on parenting may increase other disciplinary strategies.

Child physical abuse. Despite widespread concerns that certain CP teachings about discipline may increase parents' child physical abuse, no published studies have directly examined this question. In three rigorous longitudinal studies, higher parental religious attendance substantially decreased the occurrence or potential of physical abuse (Appendix B). For instance, young children whose parents rarely attended services were more than twice as likely to be physically abused than were children whose parents attended church regularly, according to official state records and youth self-reports across a 17-year period (Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Salzinger, 1998). In addition, in studies of low-income or minority mothers, higher levels of the importance of religion correlate with a lower risk of severe physical aggression toward offspring (Appendix B). In summary, greater general religiousness appears to lower the risk

of child physical abuse, but more work is needed to determine whether certain spiritual beliefs (e.g., biblical beliefs) or practices (e.g., prayers) centered on discipline could increase this risk.

Affection and monitoring. Speculation that CP parents are excessively authoritarian because of the spiritual weight their subculture places on child obedience and corporal punishment is offset by a national surveys that have tied biblical conservatism to greater parental physical affection toward children (Wilcox, 1998) and to CP fathers giving their children more affection and supervision than other fathers (Bartkowski & Xu, 2000). Further, in a small-scale study, the more biblically conservative mothers viewed parenting as a sacred endeavor, the more positive mother–child interactions they reported (Murray-Swank et al., 2006). Thus, CP parents often appear to blend firmness and warmth in childrearing (Wilcox, 1998). Again, though, in national surveys, higher religious attendance also predicted parental affection (Wilcox, 1998) and fathers' appraisals of their supervision, mental investment, and quality of parent–child bonds (Bartkowski & Xu, 2000; King, 2003). Moreover, attendance mediated CP affiliation ties to such outcomes. Thus, active participation in diverse religious traditions may offer parents spiritual resources to facilitate positive parent–child interactions in families drawn from nondistressed samples.

Coping with stressful contexts. Studies on low-income and disproportionally single minority mothers suggest that religion may facilitate positive parenting in the absence of a biological father or ample economic resources (Appendix B). In such contexts, greater religious attendance and personal salience of God or spirituality have been tied to more maternal satisfaction, efficacy, authoritativeness, and consistency, as well as less parental distress and risk of child maltreatment. Although the findings imply that religion may offer single mothers valuable coping resources, the studies' global indices of religiousness obscure that some spiritual beliefs and behaviors may exacerbate poor parenting in stressful circumstances. Extensive research on spiritual methods to cope with nonfamilial stressors (e.g., natural disasters, illness) shows that maladaptive spiritual coping is less common than adaptive spiritual coping, but the former consistently predicts undesirable psychosocial outcomes (Pargament, 1997, 2007). Similarly, in the sole study that assessed specific spiritual coping methods, mothers who experienced spiritual struggles with God or a faith community about parenting also reported lower parental investment and satisfaction (Dumas & Nissley-Tsiopinis, 2006).

Adolescents: Parenting Processes and Relational Outcomes

Parental supervision and parenting style. Religion seems to encourage parents to make age-appropriate demands of adolescents without being excessively controlling. In national surveys, higher parental religious attendance was tied to parents imposing higher moral expectations and supervision on adolescents (Appendix B) and having more influence in their offspring's social networks (peers, other parents, teachers) (Smith, 2003). In smaller scale studies, greater general parental religiousness was tied to observations of Caucasian mothers and fathers relying more on authoritative strategies with their adolescents during videotaped problem-solving discussions (i.e., blending demands with negotiation) (Gunnoe, Hetherington, & Reiss, 1999; Simons, Simons, & Conger, 2004) and of mothers being less authoritarian. Minority parents who often participated in a spiritual community also reported more effective parenting (Simons et al., 2004). Finally, one study using a community sample from a larger project on genetics addressed the speculation that paternal authoritarianism may be less harmful to adolescents whose parents are both CPs, presumably because youths accepted their fathers' parenting style on religious grounds. Namely, in Gunnoe, Hetherington, and Reiss (2006), links found between paternal authoritarianism and adolescent depressive or externalizing symptoms in non-CP families disappeared in CP families; however, paternal authoritarianism predicted lower social responsibility and academic competence in both types of homes.

Parent–adolescent relational satisfaction and closeness. Greater individual religiousness of a parent or adolescent has been repeatedly tied to adolescents feeling more satisfied with their relationship with parents (Appendix B). Also, according to longitudinal surveys, U.S. adolescents for whom religion initially is, or becomes more important during the teen years,

later feel more satisfied and closer to parents, even controlling for their degree of rebelliousness (Regnerus & Burdette, 2006). No such links emerged for religious attendance or affiliation changes. The results imply that fostering internalized religiousness among adolescents is key for facilitating closeness to parents. Furthermore, Stokes and Regnerus (in press) found that religious dissimilarity between a U.S. parent and adolescent covaried with more relational discord and distance. A qualitative study on highly religious families identified constructive and counterproductive communication dynamics when parents tried to discuss spiritual matters with teens (Dollahite & Thatcher, 2008). Further, college students and mothers who more often had constructive dialogue about their spiritual journeys reported better relationship quality (Brelsford & Mahoney, 2008).

Relational Spirituality: Transformation of Distressed Family Relationships

Overview. As I have shown, higher levels of general religiousness by a given family member seem to facilitate the formation and maintenance of family ties in nondistressed samples (i.e., general population, community, or highly religious samples). This suggests that certain spiritual beliefs and practices could help prevent family problems from occurring for families at large (I later discuss such mechanisms more fully). Yet almost no research has directly addressed how general religiousness or specific spiritual beliefs and behaviors may operate, for better or worse, when family crises do arise. Examples of serious obstacles people face in forming a desired family structure include unwanted singlehood, cohabitation, nonmarital births, and infertility, as well as major conflict over the roles that men and women should play in the family. Research is also scarce on how religion functions when dysfunctional family processes occur that destabilize established family units. For example, I found no studies on religion and coping with infidelity, child physical abuse, and serious marital or parent–youth distress (i.e., clinic-referred samples). Because more religious individuals more often seek and enjoy harmonious family relationships, they may be especially ill equipped to handle family stressors that call for radical transformation in the formation or maintenance of family ties. Events that violate spiritual expectations about family life may trigger spiritual struggles that exacerbate relational and personal distress, or spirituality may be a wellspring of resilience. I highlight here two emerging efforts to examine spiritual coping when crises strike home (see Appendix B for three other initial studies on spiritual coping with various family difficulties).

Coping with domestic violence. Although greater general religiousness decreases the risk of domestic violence, questions remain as to how people use specific spiritual coping strategies to respond to domestic violence. Recent qualitative studies highlight that an inner sense of spiritual support from God can empower victims to leave an unrepentant offender, whereas a felt obligation to God can encourage victims to remain attached despite the personal costs (e.g., Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000; Gillum, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2006). Other findings suggest that involvement in some religious groups can facilitate or deter the exit of survivors from physically abusive relationships (Giesbrecht & Sevcik, 2000). A synthesis of this qualitative work illustrates that survivors of domestic violence from conservative religious backgrounds often transform their spiritual expectations of the roles of husbands and wives in marriage and draw on faith as a resource to leave or reconcile with an offender (Yick, 2008).

Postdivorce adjustment. An initial effort to delineate specific ways that spiritual coping impacts adults' postdivorce adjustment found that most divorced people ($N = 100$) drawn from several Midwestern states appraised their divorce as the loss or violation of something sacred, experienced spiritual struggles with the divorce, and engaged in adaptive spiritual coping strategies to manage it (Krumrei, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2009). Negative spiritual appraisals and struggles predicted greater depression and coparenting conflict at the time of the divorce and 1 year later, whereas adaptive spiritual coping facilitated greater personal growth; the results held after controlling for nonspiritual coping and struggles. Similarly, college students who recalled viewing a parental divorce in the prior 5 years as a sacred loss and desecration and as having spiritual struggles reported greater current psychosocial distress (Warner, Mahoney, & Krumrei, 2009). Unexpectedly, students' use of spiritual coping strategies that are usually helpful (e.g., seeking divine support) was also linked

to greater current distress, perhaps signaling ongoing spiritual and emotional turmoil related to parental divorce. Notably, youths whose parents divorce more often switch or disengage from organized religious groups (e.g., Zhai, Ellison, Glenn, & Marquardt, 2007). Overall, the results imply that divorce may often be experienced as a spiritual trauma with relational and personal consequences that merit more attention.

In summary, scarce research exists on how religion operates in samples suffering serious family distress. Better identification of specific spiritual resources that help people cope effectively with family stressors and of spiritual struggles that can exacerbate distress is needed to help individuals, clergy, therapists, and religious organizations intervene in useful ways to resolve family dysfunction. This includes specific spiritual beliefs and practices tied to a relationship with the divine, family relationships themselves, and spiritual communities. I discuss such mechanisms next.

Relational Spirituality: Three Sets of Relational Spiritual Mechanisms

Overview. The findings I have reviewed from the past decade link greater general religiousness to family functioning. The reliance on global items to assess religiousness in most (77%) quantitative studies, however, obscures why such associations exist. Religious affiliation, attendance, and salience could signal many distinctive spiritual beliefs and practices about family life that matter. Yet such global variables may also reflect generic psychosocial mechanisms tied to religious involvement (e.g., social support, coercion) that have little to do with the sacred or unique substance of spiritual beliefs or practices centered on family relationships. In-depth research is needed to illuminate the many distinctive spiritual beliefs and practices that could help or hinder family relationships. Examples include adaptive or maladaptive beliefs about family life rooted in Scripture or religious teachings and individual or family religious rituals focused on family issues. In the rest of this article, I draw attention to three sets of spiritual mechanisms centered on family relationships. Each set involves a different spiritual yet relational subcontext wherein spiritual beliefs and practices may operate: (a) family member(s) relying on a relationship with the divine, (b) a family relationship itself being invested with spiritual properties, and (c) family member(s) relying on relationships with spiritual communities. These mechanisms could operate outside of being involved in organized religion, but many people presumably draw on faith traditions to foster these mechanisms. In addition, as Table 1 indicates, each set of mechanisms could apply to any of the three stages of formation, maintenance, and transformation of family relationships, but nearly all available research addresses the maintenance stage. Finally, although current research predominantly involves Christian samples, these mechanisms could apply to diverse religious traditions.

Each party's perceived relationship with the divine. A family member's search for the sacred involves developing an understanding of the divine, God, or transcendent reality and taking a position in relationship to this core element of the sacred. For some, such a connection represents a psychologically powerful bond. For example, people speak of having a close relationship with an external deity who has well-delineated features; however, people also speak of experiencing profound connections to a divinity in the self or to supernatural forces that permeate life (Pargament, 2007). People travel along diverse cognitive and behavioral pathways to foster their felt connections to the divine, within and outside the self. Such pathways range from the solitary exploration to engagement in religious social networks. From a family system's perspective, these endeavors may yield a perceived connection with the divine that operates alongside other family relationships, with or without the awareness of other family members.

People may turn to a perceived connection with the divine for insight into appropriate goals for family relationships and how to cope with obstacles in achieving these ends (Mahoney, 2005). Virtually no empirical research has directly assessed the degree to which people rely on the divine to form family ties or transform familial relationships marked by serious dysfunction; instead, studies on such topics rely on general markers of religiousness (e.g., affiliation, attendance). Nevertheless, religions offer abundant and diverse theological messages about God's intentions for family matters (Onedera, 2008). A common theme is that believers should seek divine wisdom in making decisions

about whom and when to marry, the context in which to become a parent, and gendered (or not) spousal roles in the family. Extensive research on spiritual coping methods to deal with nonfamilial stressors (e.g., natural disasters, illness) (Pargament, 1997, 2007) implies that people may also often seek divine support to cope with crises that interfere with the formation of desired family relationships (e.g., infertility) and destabilize intact relationships (e.g., infidelity). Prior research also suggests that turning to the divine can be helpful or harmful depending on whether such coping offers positive coping resources or triggers spiritual struggles (Pargament, 1997, 2007). Hopefully, the next decade will witness more in-depth research on how a perceived connection with the divine shapes the formation of family relationships and the transformation of those that are not working.

Researchers have begun to examine closely ways couples turn to the divine to maintain their relationships, for better or worse, through the ups and downs of daily life. For example, Butler and colleagues have articulated helpful and harmful ways that a spouse may privately turn to a deity to cope with marital tensions (Butler et al., 2002; Gardner et al., 2008). An exemplary new research program with college students also demonstrates that privately praying for a romantic partner's well-being, or benevolent prayer, facilitates relationship satisfaction longitudinally and beyond the overall frequency of any individual or dyadic prayer and other key positive or negative relationship processes (Fincham et al., 2008). Furthermore, experimental research shows that praying for others facilitates selfless concern; gratitude; and forgiveness of others, including romantic partners (Lambert, Fincham, Braithwaite, Graham, & Beach, in press; Lambert, Fincham, Stillman, Graham, & Beach, in press).

The family relationship as spiritual. Another way the search for the sacred can be woven into the search for family relationships is for a family unit to become part of the sacred. Religions offer people myriad spiritual beliefs or practices designed to elevate the status of a family relationship to the sacred realm (Onedera, 2008). One such cognitive process, sanctification, has begun to receive empirical attention. Several studies on the sanctification of marriage and of parenting (Appendix B) have shown that many people perceive a family relationship as having divine significance and character, by viewing the bond either as having sacred qualities (e.g., is sacred, is part of a larger spiritual plan) or as a manifestation of God (e.g., God plays a role in the relationship; it is a reflection of God's will). Such findings dovetail with calls in the sociology of religion for renewed study of sacralization (Demerath, 2007). Such cognitions motivate the pursuit and protection of family relationships and increase the costs of their loss. Empirically, higher sanctification of marriage by married men and women in national (Lichter & Carmalt, 2009) and community samples (Mahoney et al., 1999; Mahoney, Pargament, & DeMaris, 2009) has been tied to higher marital quality, net of demographic and global religiousness or unmeasured couple-level attributes. Similarity between spouses' belief in the sanctity of their marriage also predicts marital quality better than either spouse's individual belief in the sanctity of their marriage or their general religiousness (Lichter & Carmalt, 2009). Further, sanctification measures help capture the nuances of spiritually based parenting. For instance, in a small-scale community study, greater sanctification predicted less spanking by mothers with liberal biblical beliefs but more spanking among biblically conservative mothers (Murray-Swank et al., 2006). Further, consistent with CP models of parenting, sanctification of parenting was tied to increased positive mother – child interactions for biblically conservative mothers, but it did not alter the relatively high rates of positivity reported by biblically liberal mothers.

Family members may also engage in behaviors that invest family relationships with spiritual significance. Religious wedding ceremonies and baby-naming rituals are examples. Individuals can engage in various spiritual activities to enhance the perceived spirituality of family relationships (e.g., meditation, spiritual readings, religious education classes) that may or may not overlap with a strongly felt personal relationship with the divine. Further, spiritual activities can take place overtly between family members, such as spiritual dialogues and shared prayer or rituals at home. In fact, highly religious families report placing high value on such activities (Marks, 2004), but their implications for family functioning are just beginning to emerge. In the singular quantitative study on American parents' spiritual activities in the home and child development, family prayer was tied to better child

adjustment, whereas spousal conflict about religion had the opposite effect (Bartkowski, Xu, & Levin, 2008). Dyadic spiritual activities between spouses also predicted marital quality better than global religious measures (Mahoney et al., 1999) and beyond parallel measures of nonspiritual joint activities (Lichter & Carmalt, 2009). In addition, in-depth spiritual dialogue between college students and mothers predicted greater collaboration to deal with conflict, even after controlling for discussion of other sensitive topics (Brelsford & Mahoney, 2008). Nevertheless, dyads that triangulate God into the their conflicts destructively are likely worse off than those who leave God out of the picture entirely (Brelsford & Mahoney, in press; Gardner et al., 2008).

Relationships with spiritual communities. A given family member's search for the sacred often occurs in a network of relationships with fellow believers that could foster distinctive spiritual cognitions or behaviors tied to the formation, maintenance, and transformation of family relationships. In qualitative studies, highly religious couples from Christian, LDS, Jewish, and Muslim traditions have reported that their religious community helps them maintain family ties by reinforcing beliefs about the spiritual purposes of marriage and parenting and by promoting spiritual rituals at home, such as family prayer (Dollahite & Marks, 2009; Goodman & Dollahite, 2006). But quantitative studies to reinforce such claims rely on global markers of religiousness that do not pinpoint ways that spiritual communities may enhance or undermine familial functioning. Religious attendance, for instance, may give access to social resources that can also be obtained via involvement in nonspiritual social networks, such as recreational or service organizations. Examples of social resources offered by involvement with religious groups that can have little to do with the content of spiritual beliefs or practices includes increasing the family's integration into the broader community; providing structured opportunities to invest time in family activities, alongside demographically similar families; or aiding in the moral socialization of children (Edgell, 2005, Wilcox, 2004). Sociologists also have suggested that traditional ideologies about family life promoted by many religious groups explain why religious attendance facilitates family relationships (Edgell, 2005; Wilcox, 2004). Yet much work remains to discern if and how spiritual networks facilitate spiritual beliefs or practices that are uniquely helpful for marriage or parenting beyond generalized social control or support. Further, work remains to clarify the circumstances when relationships with a broader spiritual community may exacerbate relational or individual distress because of the high costs of violating communal spiritual norms and potentially losing access to benefits found in this distinctive social network.

Take-Home Reflections: Directions for the Next Decade

Although 184 peer-reviewed studies were published in the past decade on religion and family life, only a handful of studies were conducted on any one of the many family topics examined (Appendix A). Overall, the findings imply that higher general religiousness helps form (e.g., marital unions) and maintain (e.g., lowers divorce risk) traditional family bonds. Scarce research exists, though, on specific positive or negative roles that religion may play in families, especially in nontraditional or distressed families. Thus, three issues merit far more attention to gain a sophisticated scientific understanding of faith in family life: (a) What is unique about religion that influences family functioning? (b) Is religion relevant to traditional and nontraditional families? and (c) Can different manifestations of religion either help or harm family relationships?

To facilitate future research, I organized this review around the relational spirituality framework. The framework sorts research on faith and family into the three broad stages over time: (a) formation, (b) maintenance, and (c) transformation. I did this to help researchers discriminate between family issues that do (formation) and do not (maintenance) tend to engender major theological controversies across and within religious communities. Findings related to formation include getting married, wanting and investing time in forming a parent–child relationship, and structuring spousal roles. Findings on maintenance include the quality of marital and parent–youth bonds and the risk of divorce, domestic violence, infidelity, and child physical abuse. Limited research exists on the roles of religion in distressed families.

Scholars need to articulate how their findings pertain to the outcomes within these three stages. Many controversies showcased in the media in the past decade about faith and family seem to reflect underlying tensions over the

spiritual legitimacy of the formation of traditional (e.g., heterosexual marriage with children) versus nontraditional (e.g., cohabitation, same-sex marriage, or nonmarital birth; traditional vs. nontraditional spousal roles) family units and critics' concerns of how religion can go awry in dysfunctional families (e.g., denial of child abuse). Yet diverse faith communities promote similar virtues that could help family members maintain healthy family relationships (e.g., commitment, sacrifice). Scholars could increase the sophistication of public discourse about religion by being clear about whether their findings fit in. The fact that higher general religiousness tends to prevent difficulties in maintaining family ties in national or community samples (e.g., lower risk of domestic violence) does not exclude the possibility that some manifestations of religion can make intervention with distressed families more problematic (e.g., those experiencing domestic violence). Greater sensitivity to the family contexts in which religion decreases rather than increases family difficulties could facilitate greater dialogue across ideological lines in religious and academic circles.

Researchers also need to be clear about the inferences that can and cannot be made from findings that rely on global indicators of religiousness. Approximately 77% of quantitative studies in the past decade rely on one or two items about a given family member's religiousness (e.g., attendance, importance). Such global items obscure the various mechanisms through which religion operates and leave tremendous room for scholars to speculate as to why faith matters for family life. A major agenda item for the future is for family researchers to lobby for national surveys of family life to include richer items. Affiliation with a religious tradition appears to be a particularly poor way to illuminate the spiritual mechanisms operating in families. Yet theoretical discourse on faith and family in the past decade has emphasized how belonging to a CP group in the United States promotes traditional heterosexual marriage, men's dedication to their families, and a distinctive authoritative parenting style (e.g., Wilcox, 2004, 2006). Increasing evidence supports the fact that mothers and fathers who are more biblically conservative tend to blend greater strictness with warmth in raising children. Findings about family outcomes other than parental use of corporal punishment, however, suggest that greater religious attendance and salience are key regardless of type of affiliation. Furthermore, a minority of Americans claim a CP affiliation (about 25% – 30%), and most are affiliated with non-CP faith traditions (55% – 60%) or claim no religious affiliation (12% – 15%) but often still say that religion or spirituality is important to their lives. In addition, after peaking around 43% in the 1950s, a rapidly declining percentage of U.S. families fit the ideal conservative religious familism model of a breadwinning father married to the biological mother of the pair's children (Edgell, 2005). Given these cultural factors, conceptual models that argue that religion's primary, if not exclusive, function for family life is to shore up the formation and maintenance of traditional nuclear families easily reinforces premature conclusions that religion will become ever more irrelevant to contemporary family life. Researchers need to pursue alternative conceptual models, and data, to demonstrate the broader implications of religion. Otherwise, family scholars will probably continue to ignore this multifaceted dimension of family life.

To advance in-depth research, the relational spirituality framework I created here also delineates three sets of mechanisms by which spiritual beliefs and practices can be substantively integrated, for better or worse, into family relationships: (a) each party's relationship with the divine, (b) the family relationship having spiritual properties, and (c) family members' relationships with spiritual communities. The content of the spiritual beliefs and practices determine whether they are likely to help or harm relational (and individual) functioning in a particular relationship context. Initial studies on specific constructs (e.g., benevolent prayer for a partner, sanctification of marriage or parenting) offer conceptual insights about ways religion may facilitate family relationships and predict family functioning better than single-item measures of individual religiousness (e.g., religious affiliation, attendance, importance). A handful of studies also highlight ways that certain spiritual behaviors, such as triangulating God into family conflicts, can increase dyadic conflict. Future research should likewise be balanced in investigating potentially helpful and harmful spiritual beliefs and practices. For example, some scholars theorize that some conservative Christian parents may rely on certain biblical passages to justify child physical abuse; studies are needed that directly address this question. Yet when greater general religiousness has been tied to

desirable parenting practices, researchers tend to attribute the results to the generic social support drawn from religious groups, not a parent's reliance on a connection to the divine to guide parenting; specific spiritual cognitions and practices about parenting; or spiritual support from cobelievers to bolster these mechanisms. Here and in Table 1, I highlight potentially helpful and harmful spiritual mechanisms to spur more in-depth and balanced research on the unique roles of religion in family life. Readers are referred elsewhere for discussion of potentially important nonspiritual mechanisms that religion may signal (Dollahite & Marks, 2009; Edgell, 2005; Mahoney et al., 2001; Wilcox, 2004; 2006).

Finally, available research rests heavily on cross-sectional survey data from U.S. national and community data sets whose respondents therefore are predominantly Christian. Further, most studies involve married couples with or without children. More research is needed that relies on qualitative and observational data as well as longitudinal designs to help clarify sticky questions of selection bias. Religion – family links may also vary according to ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, religious tradition, and other facets of social location. In addition, research is needed on how and whether spiritual mechanisms may moderate the effects of economic strain on family relationships. Collectively, such efforts can keep faith and family in the spotlight while promoting more illuminated dialogue within and between believers and nonbelievers on the many spiritual facets of one of the most important, and oft-times sacred, realms of daily life—family relationships.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found in the online version of this article:

Appendix A Family – Religion Topics in Peer-Reviewed Studies Published Journals.

Appendix B Supplemental Comments and Citations.

Please note: Wiley-Blackwell is not responsible for the content or functionality of any supporting materials supplied by the authors. Any queries (other than missing material) should be directed to the corresponding author for the article.

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