Families and Religious Beliefs, Practices, and Communities
Linkages in a Diverse and Dynamic Cultural Context

DAVID C. DOLLAHITE, LOREN D. MARKS, AND MICHAEL A. GOODMAN

Families are sacred and central to major world religions, and all world religions include beliefs and practices that influence families (Eliade, 1993; Houseknecht & Pankhurst, 2000; Madsen, Lawrence, & Christiansen, 2000). The United States may be the most religious and religiously diverse nation in terms of voluntary participation in religious institutions (Eck, 2001; Melton, 2003; Stark & Finke, 2000). Ninety-five percent of all married couples and parents in America report a religious affiliation (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001), about 90% desire religious training for their children (Gallup & Castelli, 1989), over half say they attend religious services at least monthly (Heaton & Pratt, 1990), and 60% say religion is "important" or "very important" to them (McCullough, Hoyt, Larson, Koenig, & Thoresen, 2000); only 2% say they do not believe in God (Sherkat & Ellison, 1999). Even given the tendency of U.S. survey respondents to exaggerate their religious participation, religious beliefs and activities continue to be reported as an important part of American family life (Christiano, 2000).

As Pankhurst and Houseknecht (2000) stated, "Religion and family may be primordial institutions, but they are also dynamic and 'modern' institutions" (p. 28). The latter half of the 20th century in the United States was characterized by remarkable growth in both religious and family diversity owing

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to changes in religious expression, increasing numbers of immigrants with non-Jewish and non-Christian religious affiliations, and changes in family structure. There now is tremendous diversity in North America in how individuals and families experience and express spiritual beliefs and practices, with as much diversity within major faith groups as between them (Eck, 2001). Linder (2003) has listed 216 major Christian denominations, and Melton (2003) has documented over 2,600 distinct faith communities in the United States and Canada (70% are Christian). Increases in religious diversity continue at a rapid pace; indeed, religious diversity may be greater than other types of diversity (Eck, 2001; Melton, 2003). Moreover, Americans have always been dynamic in their religious identities and degrees of adherence, as manifested in high levels of intergenerational and personal changes in orthodoxy and activity within faith communities and high levels of conversions from one faith community to another. Scholars have only begun to capture this religious diversity in relation to marriage and family life.

According to the 2000 U.S. census, there is widespread variation in how family households are structured (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001). Recent important changes in families include higher proportions of individuals not marrying or marrying later, increased numbers of couples cohabiting, higher rates of divorce and remarriage, increased age at birth of first child, more adult children living with parents, and married couples having more years together after children are raised. As several chapters in this book illustrate, scholars disagree as to whether the changes in marriage and family life generally have been a boon or bane to individuals, families, and societies (see also Browning, Miller-McLemore, Couture, Lyon, & Franklin, 1997).

Increased family diversity probably is associated with increased religious diversity. For example, parental divorce is positively associated with increased likelihood that children will change their religious identity through either conversion or apostasy (Lawton & Bures, 2001). The growing diversity in families complicates analyses of the connections between religiosity and family life. This is especially true if one attempts to address whether and how a specific aspect of religiosity helps or harms family relationships. Evidence from history, recent events, and social science research confirms that religion can be a potent force for good or ill; both positive and negative relationship outcomes may derive from religious factors.

In this chapter, we focus on aspects of religiosity that seem to be related to marital and parent-child relationships. Although we recognize the limits of knowledge grounded only in empirical research, we think that a careful review of research on religiosity and family offers insights for future work. We first briefly discuss the history and current status of the social scientific study of the religiosity-family linkage, along with some critical methodological and theoretical issues relevant to the religiosity-family interface. We review empirical work done in the United States during the last two decades, highlighting what we consider to be some of the best studies. Throughout this chapter, we address the difficult yet important issue of the ways in which religiosity seems to benefit or harm marriages and families. We conclude with suggestions for future scholarship and predictions about the future of family-religion interaction.

SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF THE RELIGIOSITY-FAMILY LINKAGE

The religiosity-family linkage has received relatively little attention from social scientists when compared to other aspects of personal and social life (Pankhurst & Houseknecht,
2000). Many social scientists have been skeptical of the viability and even the desirability of research on religiosity and have treated personal and familial religious beliefs and practices as nonissues (Sherkat & Ellison, 1999).

In recent years, however, there has been an increase in both the quantity and the quality of empirical research linking religiosity and families, due in part to a growing acknowledgment that “even from an atheistic or agnostic position, it is important to understand what motivates and energizes a large portion of the world’s population” (Pankhurst & Houseknecht, 2000, p. 9). There was some sustained attention by family scholars to religion in the 1980s (see Bahr & Chadwick, 1985; D’Antonio & Aldous, 1983; Marciano, 1987; Thomas, 1988; Thomas & Cornwall, 1990; Thornton, 1985), and in the later 1990s and early 2000s special issues on religion and family life were published in a number of scholarly journals: Journal of Family Psychology (Vol. 13, No. 4), Journal of Family Psychotherapy (Vol. 13, Nos. 3/4), Journal of Men’s Studies (Vol. 7, No. 1), and Review of Religious Research (Vol. 43, No. 3). Despite the increased international scholarly and popular interest in religion, however, there was no article on religion and family in the 2000 decade review issue (Vol. 62, No. 4) of the Journal of Marriage and the Family, probably the most influential scholarly journal dealing with marriage and family issues.

Critical Issues in the Family-Religiosity Literature

Many studies examining the linkages between personal, marital, and familial life indicate correlations between religiosity and various beneficial outcomes (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Mahoney et al., 2001), but there is also evidence linking religiosity and negative outcomes, although such studies are relatively rare. Apparently a blend of positive and negative family outcomes is associated with religious involvement, depending on the type of involvement, family structure, and other contextual factors (e.g., Ellison & Levin, 1998; Pargament, Smith, Koenig, & Perez, 1998).

Dimensions of Religiosity

Religiosity is complex and multifaceted and has been conceptualized and measured in many ways (Hill & Hood, 1999). Marks and Dollahite (2001) described religiosity as a three-dimensional construct composed of (a) religious beliefs (personal, internal beliefs, framings, meanings, perspectives), (b) religious practices (outward, observable expressions of faith such as prayer, scripture study, rituals, traditions, or less overtly sacred practices or abstinence that is religiously grounded), and (c) religious communities (support, involvement, and relationships grounded in a congregation or less formal religious group). Past research has too frequently examined only one of these dimensions at a time, thereby failing to capture the complex interaction of religious beliefs, practices, and communities in family life. We emphasize here that religiosity is multidimensional and that generalization across dimensions is risky, although some of the studies considered below engage in it.

Types of Religiosity

Religious denomination is an important consideration, although generally less potent than it is presumed to be and was formerly. Faith communities differ dramatically in the degree of familism and the extent to which their practices affect families. There are also important differences between orthodox or traditional bodies and their more progressive or liberal counterparts. Extreme levels of
belief, commitment, and behavior differ dramatically from lower or moderate levels in their consequences for families. Faith communities include highly individualistic spiritualities (e.g., New Age), more institutional forms (e.g., mainstream Protestantism), and highly familistic faiths (e.g., Mormonism), and teachings and expectations of family life differ among them. In addition to variants between individualistic and familistic types of faith, Arterburn and Felton (2001) identified several hazardous religious beliefs and practices that they characterized as abuses of religion or toxic faith, the antithesis of healthy faith. It is essential to index not just religiosity but type of religiosity.

Types of Family

It is also important to specify the types of families being considered. For example, on the basis of doctrine presented in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious texts, gay and lesbian couples are less likely to find congenial homes in most conservative and moderate faith communities than elsewhere (Gordis, 1991), although there have been shifts in recent history (Francoeur, 1983). Some types of families seem to draw more benefits from religious involvement than others. For example, a study of depression in unmarried adolescent mothers found that (a) young single mothers with no particular faith reported the lowest levels of depression, (b) the tension between religious values and unmarried pregnancy was stressful for young women who reported a significant religious orientation, and (c) “even greater distress [was] experienced by young women who lived in an unmarried relationship while at the same time taking part in religious activities” (Sorensen, Grindstaff, & Turner, 1995, p. 80). In comparison, religiosity was not related to depression among married, religiously active teen mothers.

Moving from structure to race, a growing number of studies suggest that faith communities are especially important to black families (McAdoo, 1995). Black churches tend to be more supportive of single-parent families than white churches, but even in black churches divorced and separated women receive less social support than do widows (Taylor & Chatters, 1988). A key challenge for most American churches in the 21st century will be to find a balance between supporting the standard of marriage-based families that is idealized in most American churches and addressing the pluralistic family realities that confront them.

Types of Scholarship

Scholars differ widely in the questions they ask, the approaches they employ, the motivations for their research, and the degree to which they are aware of and articulate their biases and agenda in their work. In the past, family and religious scholars with sociological training have dominated empirical work on religiosity-family linkages, but recently more psychologically oriented scholars have entered this domain (Holden, 2001; Parke, 2001). Sociologists tend to view both religion and family as social institutions, and their approach is more demographic (or distal) in nature (e.g., key variables are denomination, homogamy, church attendance) than the approaches emphasizing intrapersonal and interpersonal processes (proximal variables) that are favored by psychologists. Psychologists are also more likely to foster pragmatic intervention in churches or social service agencies.

In a society that values diversity, scholars should be aware of diversity in religiosity, family type, method, outcomes, and scholarly agenda. When all the permutations of the foregoing possibilities are considered, two implications arise: (a) Scholars should be
as clear as possible with themselves and their readers on the issues mentioned above, and (b) they should present their work within contexts and their results as tentative.

Religiosity and Family Relationships

Religiosity and Marriage

Marital Satisfaction. Several reviews have reported that religious involvement is associated with greater marital happiness, adjustment, commitment, and lower risk of conflict (Bahr & Chadwick, 1985; Mahoney et al., 1999; Sherkat & Ellison, 1999). A few such studies will be briefly reviewed. First, in a study of Seventh-Day Adventists, family worship was related to marital satisfaction (Dudley & Kosinski, 1990). Two recent studies employed innovative conceptual and methodological approaches to religiosity and marital satisfaction. Mahoney et al. (1999) found that couples who reported higher levels of sanctification of their marriage (considered their marriage to be sacred) had greater levels of marital functioning in various domains. In a study of 120 predominantly Christian (51% Catholic, 34% Protestant) couples, Fiese and Tomcho (2001) found that two proximal variables (meaning of holiday religious rituals, practice of rituals) were significantly related to marital satisfaction, whereas a more distal variable (importance of religion to the family) had little association with satisfaction. All three of these studies indicated positive correlations between some religious practices (dimensions of religiosity) and marital satisfaction among samples of married, predominantly white couples (types of families). However, the strengths of the correlation varied across denominations and sects (types of religiosity).

In a recent longitudinal study, Sullivan (2001) found that although couples that were more religious were less likely to seek divorce and more likely to seek help for their marriage, religiosity seemed to promote marital satisfaction only for couples in which the husbands had relatively greater mental health than other husbands; both husbands and wives in religious couples with a more reactive, negative husband were less satisfied. Another longitudinal study (Booth, Johnson, Branaman, & Sica, 1995) of a national data set over a 12-year period reported a positive association between marital satisfaction and religiosity, with increased religiosity related to heightened satisfaction. This study suggests that family factors influence religious involvement, indicating a bidirectional relationship between families and religiosity (see also Palkovitz, 2002). Finally, religious involvement (as opposed to nominal religious homogamy) has been found to be related to marital satisfaction, consistent with Masters and Bergin’s (1992) observation that it “seems important that one actually behaves in synchrony with one’s religious values in order for there to be beneficial . . . consequences” (p. 228) (see also Pankhurst & Houseknecht, 2000).

Certain types of religiosity also have been connected with greater support for gender inequality (Bartkowski, 1997, 2001), which could contribute to lower satisfaction, at least for wives. However, several researchers have found that many women in conservative faith communities report that they prefer traditional gender roles and relationships, that some choose such a life with full knowledge and experience with alternatives, and that they find meaning and fulfillment in this lifestyle (Griffith, 1997; Kaufman, 1993; Stacey, 1990). Other women may leave such religious communities to seek less gendered alternatives.

Some researchers have reported a relation between religiosity and higher acceptance of spousal abuse (Hathaway-Clark, 1980), especially in conservative religious communities.
In contrast, more recent studies report no relationship between conservative Protestantism and domestic violence (Ellison & Anderson, 2001; Ellison, Bartkowski, & Anderson, 1999), and Gurnadi, Caetano, and Schaefer (2002) found that rates of male-female intimate violence “were highest among those in Liberal groups and lowest among those in Fundamentalist groups” (p. 149).

A final point regarding religiosity and domestic violence is that an estimated 65% to 80% of all domestic abuse is related to alcohol abuse (Gallagher, 1987). Many studies report an inverse relation between religiosity and alcohol and illicit drug use and abuse (Gurnadi et al., 2002; Koenig et al., 2001). Thus, through its impact on alcohol and drug abuse, religiosity may decrease domestic abuse in some contexts. However, the generalization that religiosity helps prevent abuse is not without empirical opposition. For example, a notable counterexample is presented by Hathaway-Clark (1980), who found that battered women are often highly religious and concluded that religious beliefs frequently contributed to the ongoing victimization of these women (see also Arterburn & Felton, 2001). In sum, in connection with domestic violence, religiosity apparently may serve as either a risk factor or a protective factor.

Marital Stability. Meta-analytic research indicates that there is a relation between religiosity and commitment to marriage (Mahoney et al., 2001). Religious practice seems especially significant as a predictor of marital stability. Mahoney et al. (2001) found that the relation between church attendance and marital stability remained after a wide range of variables were controlled for; they concluded that couples who attended church regularly had a divorce rate of 44% compared to 60% for nonattendees. Call and Heaton (1997) reported that various aspects of couple religiosity were related to marital stability, with meeting attendance being the best predictor. A qualifying note is that these researchers studied attendance together; there was evidence that attending different congregations might foster marital instability.

From a subset of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) data set, Lein and Chiswick (1993) found that those who had classified themselves as not religious had the lowest marital stability, whereas Latter-day Saints (Mormons) and those with “other religions” (most of which were Eastern religions such as Islam and Buddhism) had the highest rates of marital stability. Same-faith marriages were much more stable than interfaith marriages (Bahr, 1981), and interfaith marriages were more stable than marriages between nonreligious persons (Lein and Chiswick, 1993). The amount of agreement on Jewish issues among same-faith Jewish and interfaith Jewish-Christian marriages was a more powerful predictor of marital conflict and stability than the type of marriage (Chinitz & Brown, 2001).

In a qualitative study of 15 couples married for 30 years or more, Robinson (1994) reported four ways that religiosity seemed to help stabilize marriages: (a) moral guidance, (b) social support, (c) emotional support, and (d) spiritual support. Noticeably absent from Robinson’s list was an aversion to divorce, held by many faiths, and the possibility that this faith-based aversion to divorce might preserve marriages that were abusive or irremediably unhealthy.

Wilson and Mussen (1996), using a subset of NSFH data, found that those with higher religiosity viewed themselves as more dependent on their marriages than those of lower religiosity. This was especially true of respondents from more conservative denominations. This feeling of greater dependence may be one reason why marriages between highly religious persons consistently appear to be more stable than marriages between nonreligious persons.
Communication and Conflict Resolution Through Prayer and Forgiveness. Couples who share the same strong religious faith might have greater marital satisfaction because they have fewer major issues over which to disagree. Another hypothesis is that they rely on similar conflict resolution strategies. Two studies (Brody, Stoneman, Flor, & McCrary, 1994; Mahoney et al., 1999) indicated that religiosity may be related to marital satisfaction and stability because religious couples are more likely to employ effective communication and conflict resolution skills, perhaps due to religious emphasis on prayer and forgiveness.

A study of Protestants and Catholics (Gruner, 1983) found that the association of marital satisfaction with prayer was highest in Pentecostal and evangelical groups. Scripture reading also was related to marital satisfaction, but only among members of Pentecostal and evangelical groups. Prayer is one of the variables often measured as a dichotomy. This variable can be studied more appropriately as an ordinal or continuous variable. Qualitative differences in prayer also deserve consideration. For example, Poloma and Pendleton (1991) identified four types of prayer: colloquial, petitional, ritual, and meditative. They found that two types of prayer, colloquial and meditative, were correlated with general well-being but that petitional and ritualistic prayers were not. Butler and colleagues have shown that prayer helps religious couples resolve their conflicts in a variety of ways (Butler, Gardner, & Bird, 1998; Butler & Harper, 1994; Butler, Stout, & Gardner, 2002) and is used as a conflict resolution ritual that serves as a spiritual self-intervention strategy (Butler et al., 2002).

Another important religion-family link is the emphasis on forgiveness in many faith communities. Since the mid-1980s, a burgeoning clinical literature has documented the benefits of relational forgiveness in a variety of personal and family issues, including couple and intergenerational relationships (Hope, 1987; Worthington & DiBlasio, 1990). There is evidence that religious teachings have a significant influence on relational forgiveness (Aponte, 1998; Benson, 1992; McCullough & Worthington, 1994; Sells & Hargrave, 1998). The links between prayer and forgiveness in couples and families certainly deserve further exploration.

Sexuality. The influence of religious beliefs regarding sexuality has been documented by Cochran and Beeghly (1991), who examined the effect of religiosity on attitudes toward nonmarital sexuality across several U.S. religions (e.g., Jewish, Catholic, Baptist), based on data collected between 1972 and 1989, and found less tolerance of extramarital relations and homosexuality in more prescriptive religions. However, Sherkat (2002) found that “gay men have high rates of religious participation, while lesbians and bisexuals have significantly lower rates of participation [and] nonheterosexuals are more likely to become apostates when compared to female heterosexuals, but no more so than are heterosexual men” (p. 313).

In connection with practice, religiosity has been consistently associated with lower premarital sexual activity (see Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993). Early studies linked strict religious upbringing with sexual dysfunction (Masters & Johnson, 1970) and greater sex guilt among married persons (Peterson, 1964), illustrating potential complexities inherent in the religiosity-and-sexuality connection. Runkel (1998) similarly argued that permanent anxiety, guilt, and tension regarding sexuality are prominent in religion and further posited an especial enmity of sexuality in Christianity generally and Catholicism specifically. Although a tension clearly exists between certain types of religiosity and sexuality, some research indicates that the main effort of even conservative
churches is to channel sexual expression into the confines of marriage rather than to promote sexual asceticism or guilt. For example, Kennedy and Whitlock (1997) surveyed 31 pastors of conservative evangelical denominations and found that although these pastors held conservative moral principles they affirmed and promoted sexuality within marriage. According to these pastors, religion and sexuality were fully compatible in the marital relationship. And Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, and Michaels (1994) found that evangelical/fundamentalists had the highest reports of sexual satisfaction.

Finally, case study research by Simpson and Ramberg (1992) indicated that religious beliefs were among the (positive or negative) factors that determined whether sexually dysfunctional persons sought sex therapy. These researchers also found that therapists who were sensitive to patients' religious beliefs improved the likelihood of successful treatment.

Conclusions: Religiosity and Marriage. Although religiosity has repeatedly been associated positively with both marital satisfaction and marital stability, researchers have not adequately explained these findings. It may be that high levels of reported religiosity and marital satisfaction are artifacts of widely perceived social desirability of religiosity and marital satisfaction in America. If so, cross-cultural studies in countries where religiosity is not the social norm (e.g., Sweden) would be illuminating. We agree with Mahoney et al. (2001) that a better understanding of the marriage-religiosity linkage may be derived from increased emphasis on the relationship between well-measured proximal variables (e.g., religious beliefs about the marriage, joint religious activities) than from a continued focus on global indicators of more distal variables (e.g., denominational homogamy, church attendance).

Religiosity and Parent-Child Relationships

Recent empirical studies report positive connections between religiosity and parent functioning (Brody et al., 1994; Brody, Stoneman, & Flor, 1996; Chadwick & Top, 1993; Gunnoe, Hetherington, & Reiss, 1999), parental warmth (Bartkowski & Wilcox, 2000; Wilcox, 1998), and family-centeredness (Christiano, 2000). Parental religiosity has also been associated with various desirable child outcomes, such as fewer behavior problems, less alcohol and drug use, less antisocial behavior, and less depression (Mahoney et al., 2001).

However, the religiosity-parenting relationship is complex. Ellison (1994) theorized that congregational involvement might compound some family stressors because of the emphasis placed on family harmony. Consistent with this idea, Strawbridge, Shema, Cohen, Roberts, and Kaplan (1998) found that “[o]rganizational religiosity buffered the associations between all of the non-family stressors (financial problems, neighborhood problems, fair or poor health, disability, and chronic illness) and depression. [However], exacerbating effects were indicated for three of the [five] family stressors (abuse, marital problems, and caregiving)” (p. 123) and that for “non-family stressors, religiosity appears to buffer associations with depression, whereas for family stressors it appears to exacerbate associations with depression. Clearly, the relationships... are complex” (p. 124).

With this complexity in mind, we address four different issues relating to religiosity and parent-child relationships: (a) religiosity and fertility, (b) religiosity and responsible fathering, (c) religiosity and mothering, and (d) religiosity and authoritarian parenting.

Fertility. Certain religious denominations (and the more orthodox couples within
them) are more likely to have stronger pronatalist views than others. In 1964, Westoff, Potter, and Sagi found that religious affiliation had "the strongest [influence] of all major social issues on fertility" (p. 133), with Catholics exhibiting higher fertility than Protestants, and Protestants higher fertility than Jews. At present, however, denominational differences in fertility are minimal and tend to be associated more with ethnicity than religion, with the exceptions that Jews have lower fertility than other religious groups and that the fertility rates of fundamentalist Christians, Latino Catholics, and Latter-day Saints are markedly above U.S. norms (Christiano, 2000; Mosher, Williams, & Johnson, 1992; Wilson, Parnell, & Pagnini, 1997). Christiano (2000) has noted that conservative Christians and Latter-day Saints are characterized by "a strongly 'pronominalist' ideology and a tightly knit system of social bonds that make acting on that belief less burdensome for married couples than it might otherwise be" (p. 57). It might be hypothesized that a decrease in either pronatalist teaching or social support in child rearing would be likely to result in fertility declines among these groups.

Fathers. Recent interest in responsible fathering has prompted some research on the religiosity-fathering linkage. In one study, father religiosity predicted marital and family cohesion and fewer child behavioral and emotional problems (Brody et al., 1996). In a three-generation study of father-child relationships, Snarey (1993) found that father-child church attendance provided significant "social-emotional child-rearing support" for fathers (p. 315). In another study, religious fathers scored higher than others on a measure of generativity (father involvement) and commitment toward their children (Christiansen & Palkovitz, 1998). Wilcox (2002), using NSFH longitudinal data, found a positive relation between religiosity and father involvement. The positive associations in the religiosity-fathering literature have not yet been explained systematically.

An emerging body of qualitative research based on in-depth interviews with fathers has provided some answers to questions about religiosity and fathering. Evangelical Christian fathers reported that faith provided the spiritual motivation for them to be involved in parenting (Latshaw, 1998). Palkovitz (2002) reported that the birth or presence of children prompted personal religious introspection and/or religious involvement for some fathers, illustrating the bidirectional influences of family and religiosity variables (see also Palkovitz, Marks, Appleby, & Holmes, 2003). Religious belief and practice seem to be particularly helpful in encouraging responsible and meaningful involvement among fathers who are adapting to the death or disability of a child (Dollahite, 2003; Marks & Dollahite, 2001).

Mothers. Although studies often find differences in the ways that religiosity is linked to marital and family variables for men and women (e.g., Fiese & Tomcho, 2001), there is relatively little empirical research specifically addressing mothering and religion. Among the relevant research findings is that mothers are more likely than fathers to seek social support and are therefore likely to benefit more from faith community involvement (Koenig et al., 2001).

Although qualitative work on the religiosity-fathering connection is beginning to illuminate some of the processes underlying religiosity effects, parallel data illuminating the processes at work in connection with mothers are badly needed (for a notable exception, see Kauflman, 1993). The religiosity-mothering connection is particularly important because the influence of religiosity appears to be greater for mothers than fathers (see
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Strawbridge, Cohen, Shema, & Kaplan, 1997), although in some instances this influence is negative (Bridges & Spilka, 1992).

Parenting Style. Studies of African Americans in the rural South found religiosity positively correlated with positive parent-child relationships and co-caregiver support and negatively correlated with co-caregiver conflict and inconsistent, scolding parenting (Brody et al., 1994, 1996). Possible intervening mechanisms by which religiosity might contribute to such outcomes included heightened self-perception, attentional processes, attributional processes, and social support.

Most research shows that compared to authoritative parenting, authoritarian parenting is associated with less desirable outcomes in children (Hart, Newell, & Olsen, 2003). It has also been posited that religious parents, especially conservative Protestant parents, may be more authoritarian than others in their parenting style because corporal punishment and obedience are advocated by some influential religious leaders (Ellison, Bartkowski & Segal, 1996a, 1996b).

Some empirical research also supports an extrinsic religiosity-authoritarianism linkage (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992). Batson et al. (1993) noted that 11 of 14 studies found a negative relationship between religiosity and open-mindedness and flexibility. Theological conservatism and orthodoxy have also been associated with authoritarianism (Black, 1985; Lupfer, Hopkinson, & Kelley, 1988). Some scholars have argued that closed-mindedness, self-righteousness, prejudice, and authoritarianism are associated with fundamentalist religions and further suggest that the beliefs correlated with these outcomes in such “religious were inherited by high RWAs [right-wing authoritarians] from their parents almost as certainly as the color of their eyes” (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992, p. 127). More recent research indicates that Christian orthodoxy is inversely correlated with prejudice but positively correlated with authoritarian attitudes (Laythe, Finkle, Bringle, & Kirtkpatrick, 2002). Other research suggests that religiosity is negatively related to authoritarian parenting and positively related to authoritative parenting (Gunnoe et al., 1999; Wilcox, 1998). Flor and Knapp (2001) found that dyadic and bidirectional discussion between parents and their adolescent children (an authoritative parenting style) was significantly and positively associated with their children’s religious behavior and with the importance children attached to religion. Thus, one of the outcomes that many religious parents would find desirable (children who voluntarily accept and practice religion) is associated with an authoritative parenting style.

Summary of Research Findings on Religiosity and Family Life

How do religious beliefs, practices, and communities affect families? The short answer is: It depends. In connection with the dimension of religious beliefs, Musick (2000) stated that the relationship is complex because “on one hand, religion serves as an integrative component which boosts levels of life satisfaction… On the other, certain religious beliefs [i.e., a vindictive and punishing God] are associated with lower life satisfaction” (p. 282).

Complexity also exists for the dimension of religious practices. The literature reviewed manifests strong correlations between marital satisfaction and prayer and scripture study for certain types of religions and families, as well as a number of other beneficial psychological and relational outcomes. Even so, rigidity or dogmatism in religious practice has been correlated with outcomes such as prejudice, intolerance, and authoritarianism. Additionally, though family worship has been linked with both marital and family satisfaction, it seems that compulsory family worship may be more
detrimental to well-being and satisfaction than no family worship at all (Lee, Rice, & Gillespie, 1997).

In connection with the dimension of religious community, it seems that degree of involvement, not merely type of denominational affiliation, is correlated with higher marital stability, higher marital satisfaction, and several beneficial outcomes for the parent-child relationship. Research shows that faith communities that have higher levels of tension with the broader culture and that tend to ask more of adherents tend to be more successful in attracting and retaining members (Stark & Finke, 2000). On the other hand, Ellison and Levin (1998) indicated that some faith communities may be “greedy institutions” that demand time, energy, money, and other resources, “potentially at high costs to families” (p. 713). Even so, many seem willing to meet these costs because in the last several decades membership in low-tension communities (e.g., mainstream Protestantism) has significantly declined whereas membership in some higher-tension faith communities (evangelical Christianity, Mormonism) has steadily risen (Melton, 2003; Stark & Finke, 2000). A further complication is that although religious communities seem to buffer many forms of nonfamily stress, they may also exacerbate stress surrounding family challenges that do not mesh with the congregational ideals (e.g., divorce or out-of-wedlock pregnancy).

In conclusion, though we cannot summarily state that “religiosity” is either good or bad for families, the preponderance of studies point to a positive relationship between religiosity and salutary outcomes in marriage and family relationships. More specifically, it appears that many couples and families are strengthened by their religious beliefs, practices, and communities. On the other hand, there is some evidence that certain types of religious beliefs and practices seem to have harmful consequences for families. We reiterate that the type of religion, the dimension of religiosity (belief, practice, or community), and the type of family must all be considered in assessing the religiosity-family connection with appropriate empirical, conceptual, and contextual sensitivity.

Limitations and Weaknesses of Extant Research

Typically, when religious beliefs and practices have been included as variables in research on families, they have been conceptualized and measured without much sophistication (Mahoney et al., 2001; Thomas & Cornwall, 1990). Although the following limitations apply to much family-religiosity research, several of them are also manifest in social science research generally.

Limitation 1: Lack of Theory on the Religiosity-Family Linkage

In contemporary social science, methodological rigor is fairly common, but accompanying theoretical excellence is more rare. Mahoney et al. (2001), in a review of the literature on religion and family life, stated that lack of conceptual clarity is a significant problem. Likewise, Sullivan (2001) noted that “perhaps the largest impediment to a more complete understanding of how religiosity affects marital functioning is that many studies have been exploratory in nature or empirically-driven rather than theory-driven” (p. 611). Further progress is unlikely until there is more coherent conceptualization of religiosity within family contexts. Currently, relevant findings are more or less loosely connected, but there is no coherent, organized conceptual framework to integrate them. With relatively few exceptions, researchers continue to corroborate previous findings or find correlations but offer few grounded explanations of the
religiosity-family interface. Snarey and Dollahite (2001) argued that there is an urgent need for better use of theory, including good middle-range theories that address the complex relationships between familial and religious processes and perhaps even an overarching theory that links religiosity and family. Such contributions would facilitate needed explanations. Of course, exceptions exist. Recent notable conceptual work includes Mahoney and her colleagues (Mahoney et al., 1999, 2001; Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003) on links between marriage, parenting, and religiosity; Sullivan (2001) on religiosity and marriage; Fiese and Tomcho (2001) on religious practices and marital satisfaction; Carr and van Leeuwen (1996) on religion and feminism in a family context; Flor and Knapp (2001) on intergenerational transmission of religiosity; Butler et al. (1998, 2002) on prayer and marital conflict resolution; Garland (2002) on faith development in families; Bartkowski (1997, 2001) on evangelical gender roles; and Wilcox (1998) on parenting style.

Limitation 2: Research Design Restrictions

Most research on the religiosity-family connection is cross-sectional or correlational, making questions regarding direction of influence and causation difficult to determine. An increased emphasis on longitudinal as well as qualitative studies could significantly increase our understanding (Mahoney et al., 2001).

Limitation 3: Scant Sampling of Family Diversity

The literature on religiosity is limited in its treatment of family diversity, mostly working from samples of white, two-parent, marriage-based families, a family form that has declined over the past 50 years (Amato, 2000). There is substantive work on religiosity in African American families (e.g., Brody et al., 1994; McAdoo, 1993; Taylor & Chatters, 1988), but other American racial minorities, including Asians and Hispanics, are rarely represented (for notable exceptions, see Levin, Markides, & Ray, 1996; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). Significant increases in the number of single-parent families, stepfamilies, and families with gay and lesbian parents have not been followed by corresponding increases in the scale of religiosity-family research in such contexts.

Limitation 4: Sampling of Few Religions

One of the most conspicuous weaknesses in the literature is the lack of research on non-Christian religions and family life (Sato, 1998; Sherif, 1999). Research on Jewish families (Brodbar-Nemzer, 1988; Chinitz & Brown, 2001) rarely appears in mainstream social science journals, and there is even less empirical data on Muslim families, despite their numerical importance (about one in five inhabitants of the earth) (see Chapter 23 of this book). There is also a paucity of research on the impact of “Eastern religions” (e.g., Hinduism, Shintoism, Buddhism) on family life. Moreover, the literature on non-Christian religiosity and family life is generally descriptive rather than empirical (Schlossberger & Hecker, 1998). The overrepresentation of studies on the dominant cultural-religious groups inhibits learning about “the complex ways that faith and family life interact among those whose beliefs and practices differ from the dominant or mainstream faith traditions” (Snarey & Dollahite, 2001, p. 649). A recent exception to this tendency is the collection of studies on religiosity and family life in various cultures and subcultures found in Houseknecht and Pankhurst (2000).
RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR FUTURE SCHOLARSHIP:
EXPLORING DYNAMIC DIVERSITY

Given the complexities inherent in this
domain of inquiry and the continuing trends
toward religious and familial diversity, what
should scholarship on the religiosity-family
connection in a postmodern context look
like? What are the most compelling questions
to ask? What are the best methods to address
these questions? What are the most relevant
contexts and most important populations
that should be studied?

More Research on
Families From Diverse Faiths

First, we need more creative scholarship
on families from a much wider variety
of religious perspectives. With over 800
non-Christian primary religious bodies
(denominations) and tens of thousands of
non-Christian congregations or groups in
the United States, there are abundant possi-
bilities (Melton, 2003).

More Prejudice-Free Studies
of Highly Religious Families

Highly religious families are themselves a
diverse type of family and also are likely to
be disproportionately present among
racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse
families. However, Stark and Finke (2000)
asserted that “today most social scientists
continue to display a substantial bias against
those who take their religion very seriously
(‘fundamentalist’ being a deadly epithet)”
(p. 14). An example of such bias is much
scholarly discourse about gender roles in
conservative or orthodox Jewish, Christian,
and Muslim families. Ironically, perhaps
some of the best and most balanced research
with such families has been done by scholars
with liberal and feminist orientations (see
Barikowski, 2001; Griffith, 1997; Kaufman,
1993; Stacey, 1990). Such efforts to avoid
bias against highly religious families facilitate
efforts to understand the family-religion link-
age among those for whom religion is the
center of life and who therefore often have
the richest linkages between their faith and
their family life.

More Detailed Comparative Research

Researchers in large-scale studies tend to
ask more broad, superficial questions to
many people of varied backgrounds, and
most qualitative researchers tend to ask more
detailed, in-depth questions to fewer people
of homogeneous groups. Relatively few stud-
ies provide in-depth comparative exploration
of the same issues across diverse families.
Thus, one important strategy is to do inten-
sive studies while employing quantitative
measures and qualitative interviews with
members of multiple faith communities,
using the same questions and methods. This
will provide important comparative data that
move research beyond the more global,
superficial studies of the past. There also is a
need for replications of existing work across
different ethnic and religious communities.

More Focus on the
Paradoxes of Religiosity

There are many important and interesting
paradoxes in the domain of religion and
family life that deserve special attention:
(a) Religion is a unifying force for many cou-
ples and families but a divisive force in
others; (b) religiosity is both a conservative
and a transformative force in relationships;
(c) there are both mundane and transcenden-
tal aspects to religious life, and both of these
affect families in meaningful ways; (d) a
strong religious identity both unites a family
with other adherents and separates them
from members of other faiths or nonbelievers;
(e) religion both excites and calms passions within families; (f) strong religious commitments have important binding and liberating features to them; and (g) faith has both highly private and highly public aspects, and both are relevant to family life. Such paradoxes merit sustained exploration because careful attention to paradox may provide telling insights on the religion-family interface.

More Excellent Qualitative Research

Creative and rigorous qualitative research is needed in a number of areas. Some key correlations between religious involvement and family life are well enough established that efforts might be profitably spent on research aimed at interpretation and application. Though the correlations have mounted, the field still has few empirically documented explanations. Although the mantra “correlation does not prove causation” is certainly true, it is possible to simply ask people straight out whether and how they believe their religious beliefs, practice, and communities influence their marriage and family life and to ask them to examine critically their own impressions of these matters.

Focus on Adaptive and Maladaptive Aspects of Religiosity

The challenge to simultaneously and systematically assess both adaptive and maladaptive influences of religious involvement at individual, marital/couple, and familial levels should be a central aim of future scholarship (Mahoney et al., 2001; Pargament, 1997). There must be greater attention to (a) the direction(s) of established relationships, (b) the processes involved in the linkage, and (c) the meanings inherent in the multidimensional expressions of religiosity for families and their members. Americans have a tendency toward spiritual and religious eclecticism, a long history of pragmatic progressivism, and a growing emphasis on enhancing physical, emotional, and relational well-being. These tendencies, coupled with the currently diverse and dynamic nature of religiosity and family life, suggest that there may be many people for whom exploration of the contexts in which religiosity helps or hinders family well-being has critical applied as well as academic relevance. Thus, we suggest that scholars seriously consider the potential benefits involved in more systematic exploration of aspects of religious belief, practice, and community that are most likely to encourage or inhibit healthy and happy relationships among family members.

Scholars exploring the effectiveness of family therapy, for example, try to discover what types of therapeutic interventions, under what kinds of conditions, and with what kinds of families, are most likely to promote improved functioning or prevent dysfunction. Viewing religious faith as a physical or mental health intervention would be distasteful and offensive to many religious people. However, this type of thinking may help scholars move beyond simplistic attacks or defenses of religion and its relationship to family life that have too often characterized past discourse (Thomas & Sommerfeldt, 1984). For example, it is unlikely that there is a linear relationship between religiosity and family outcomes, but it is likely that both great benefits and great problems are associated with high levels of some types of religiosity. More careful and creative theory and methodology may help us to better understand how much, what type, and what dimensions of religiosity are likely to improve family relationships.

Does Religiosity Provide Transcendent Benefits?

Evidence suggests that a meaningful relationship with God can positively influence relationships with family members. Yet
some may argue that religion offers merely psychological and social benefits not qualitatively or quantitatively different from those provided by nonreligious beliefs and communities. Because religion addresses transcendent questions and aims to put people in touch with transcendent realities, a fair question is: Does religiosity provide transcendent “added value” beyond the merely psychological benefits of a coherent value system and beyond the merely social benefits of a supportive community? Dollahite (2003) argued that one of the major conceptual and empirical challenges of the future will be to explore this question of whether and how religiosity transcends other (secular) belief systems or support groups. In a society like the United States, with its extensive number and variety of nonreligious philosophies, voluntary associations, and practices oriented toward mental and physical health and relationship enhancement, it should be possible to design studies that explore differential effects on family relationships of comparable secular and religious beliefs, practices, and communities.

In brief, in the future, the most fruitful scholarly work on the links between religiosity and couple and family relationships will probably be done by scholars who (a) give careful attention to diverse families from a variety of faith communities in a diversity of contexts and cultures, (b) employ diverse methodologies to explore these linkages creatively, (c) explicitly attend to their own biases and agendas, and (d) ask people about the varieties of ways their religious beliefs, practices, and communities help and hinder their efforts to have satisfying family relationships.

CONTEMPLATING THE FUTURE

In connection with the “contemplating the future” theme of this book, we now make some general predictions regarding the future of religiosity and families. The once widely held secularization thesis that religion would be abolished in modern societies by science and reason has been largely disproved and discarded (Stark & Bainbridge, 1996; Stark & Finke, 2000). In retrospect, the oft-predicted trend toward a linear increase in societal secularization was both simplistic and dogmatic; indeed, few social trends are truly unilateral. With this in mind, we posit three simultaneous yet divergent trends in connection with American religiosity and family life for the next 30 years.

First, we predict that both atheism and secular humanism will steadily increase, although at a fraction of the rate once predicted by secularization-thesis proponents. A key reason for this prediction rests in the increasing percentage of the population who obtain a secularized university education and, more specifically, the dramatic rise in university-educated women. American women have historically been more religious than American men (Koenig et al., 2001) and also have been more likely to teach religion to their children. It is likely that this secular conversion will be most prevalent among nominally versus actively religious individuals. Clearly, a secular conversion, like a religious conversion, can influence multiple generations.

Second, on the basis of the prevalence of expressive individualism and the rise of the self-help movement in America (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swindler, & Tipton, 1985) as well as cynicism regarding organized religion, we predict a continuing increase in “religions of one” and New Age and congregation-free spirituality. Because Americans prize their time, money, and energies so highly, formal religious communities will probably have to (a) deliver high returns, rewards, and compensators or (b) lower the “costs” to their members if they are to compete in the market with the low-cost, low-commitment options that congregation-free spirituality offers (Stark & Finke, 2000).
This trend away from congregational involvement may also influence families in many ways, including the loss of social support systems, communal opportunities to serve, and close and consistent interaction with persons from across the life course.

Third, we predict that certain high-tension familistic faiths whose doctrines are markedly different from those of the dominant secular culture will continue to grow. Although the handful of rapidly growing high-tension faiths, most notably Islam, certain strains of evangelical Christianity, and Mormonism, differ in doctrines and practices, they share a decided family-centeredness (Stark & Finke, 2000). Thus, there probably will be more families of a unique and diverse type: the strongly familistic, highly religious family. In sum, the increase in individualistic spirituality, secular humanism, and high-tension familistic faith will all continue, with each of the expressions of belief, practice, and community influencing families in various ways.

Religion will remain a visible force in contemporary American family life, but because of growing complexity and diversity the religiosity-family connection will need to be more carefully examined to be understood. The linkage between religiosity and families will continue to be a compelling, valuable, and relevant domain of social science scholarship and promises to become even more interesting in the future.

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Edited by
Marilyn Coleman
University of Missouri, Columbia

Lawrence H. Ganong
University of Missouri, Columbia

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