A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF FAMILY AND RELIGIOUS PROCESSES IN HIGHLY RELIGIOUS FAMILIES*

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In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with a national sample of 74 racially and religiously diverse highly religious families. We present a research-based conceptual model of the processes at work in these families as they strive together to fulfill the sacred purposes suggested by their respective faiths. Identified processes were: (a) relying on God or God’s word for support, guidance, and strength; (b) sanctifying the family by living religion at home; (c) resolving conflict with prayer, repentance, and forgiveness; (d) loving and serving others in the family, faith community, and wider community; (e) overcoming challenges and trials through shared faith; (f) abstaining from proscribed activities and substances; (g) sacrificing time, money, comfort, and convenience; (h) nurturing spiritual observance and growth through teaching, example, and discussion; (i) obeying God, prophets, parents, or commandments; and (j) putting faith or family ahead of personal or secular interests.

There has been much scholarly inquiry into the relatively high level of religiosity in the United States. Yet there has been little research on the “substantial minority” of Americans who say religion is the most important influence in their lives (Miller and Thoresen 2003:25). Nor has much research focused on internal family processes as a major factor in high religiosity (Dollahite, Marks, and Goodman 2004; Marks 2004).

A large body of research demonstrates that religiosity correlates with various measures of well-being such as physical and mental health (Ellison and Levin 1998; Hummer, Rogers, Nam, and Ellison 1999; Koenig, McCullough, and Larson 2001; Marks 2005; Pargament 1997) and better quality of family life (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, and Swank 2001; Wilcox 2002; Sherkat and Ellison 1999). Most of these findings are drawn from large-scale survey data that indicate correlations but do not offer explanations of the processes at work behind these correlations.

BEYOND CORRELATION IN RELIGION-AND-FAMILY RESEARCH

Interview-based qualitative research can be tailored to address and identify important processes and meanings, but such research studies are frequently constrained to homogeneous samples of thirty or less. Such qualitative research—including studies addressing
religion—typically sacrifices breadth for depth. To overcome the typical barriers of homogeneity and limited sample size, we collaborated to interview Christian, Jewish, Mormon, and Muslim families from diverse racial, educational, and economic backgrounds as part of an ongoing study that will eventually provide an in-depth exploration and explanation of the religion-family interface in over one hundred families from every major region of the United States. Thus, our collaboration is providing a relatively expansive sample as well as data with depth and breadth.

A Note on “Family” Research and Theory

A key consideration for us from the outset was Gerald Handel’s argument that most “family research” is not truly family research because it focuses exclusively on one relationship (usually the mother-child or marital relationship only) and often includes data from only one family member. On this note Handel posited, “No member of any family is a sufficient source of information for that family” (1996:346). Consistent with these views, we interviewed mothers and fathers, and (where approval was obtained) adolescent children (aged 10-20) from the same families. This provided multiple intra-family perspectives on a variety of family relationships including marriage, mother-child, father-child, and other extended family relationships, making the project more like the family research Handel (1996), Patton (1996), and others advocate.

Another key issue for us is the need for theory development concerning the link between the family and religion. In their lead chapter in the new Sourcebook of Family Theory and Research, Bengston, Acock, Allen, Dilworth-Anderson, and Klein emphasize the importance of building theory that focuses on “trying to understand and explain the why and how beyond the what of our data about families” (2005:4, emphasis in original). With some exceptions, there has been very little theorizing about the links between religion and family life (Chatters and Taylor 2005; Dollahite, Marks, and Goodman 2004; Mahoney et al. 2001; Snarey and Dollahite 2001). Indeed, Chatters and Taylor state that, “scholars need to develop coherent theoretical and conceptual frameworks and appropriate analytic models that describe the specific linkages and mechanisms through which religion and family are connected” (2005:518).

MODEL DEVELOPMENT AND TESTING

This paper presents a research-based conceptual model that has been developed, tested, and revised using qualitative data from 74 highly religious Christian, Jewish, Mormon, and Muslim families residing in New England (MA, CT), the Northwest (OR), the Mid Atlantic (DE, MD, PA), the Midwest (OH), and the South (LA, OK). Geographic locale is an important consideration given the regional variation in U.S. religiosity (Silk and Walsh 2006). We have interviewed 180 families (as of February, 2008) and have over 5,000 pages of double-spaced qualitative data. Carefully analyzing and coding all these interviews on a variety of research questions will continue for years. In the model we present several contexts, processes, and outcomes that appear to be at work in a diverse array of highly religious families as they strive together to fulfill the sacred purposes suggested by their faith. We first discuss the process used to develop, test, and revise the model and then present the model and illustrate it with excerpts drawn from our data.

In 2003 we developed an initial conceptual model of the religion-family interface based on two sources: (a) the extant literature on religion and family life and (b) preliminary cod-
ing and analyses of data from interviews we conducted during 2001-2002 in New England, the Mid-Atlantic, and the South. This initial framework organized ideas into three main dimensions: contexts, processes, and outcomes (Dollahite and Marks 2005). We had previously developed a framework suggesting that religion consists of at least three dimensions of experience: (a) spiritual beliefs (beliefs, framings, meanings, and perspectives that are faith-based); (b) religious practices (expressions of faith such as prayer, scripture study, rituals, traditions, or abstinences that are religiously grounded); (c) faith communities (support, involvement, and relationships rooted in one’s congregation or less formal religious community). Following the initial stage of model development we decided to integrate the overarching social and behavioral science concepts of contexts, processes, and outcomes with our framework.

After several attempts at an integrated model, we wanted to test the ideas we had developed. Specifically, we wanted others to assess our model based on their analyses of our data. There were two major stages of testing, revising, and confirming the model.

**Stage 1: Testing and revising the model**

The first stage involved training a team of nine outstanding students to code qualitative interview data gathered by the first author in New England. Specifically, students were trained to do open coding and subsequently sort their resulting coding concepts and themes as either: (a) “fits with concepts in model,” (b) “conflicts with concepts in model,” or (c) “important theme/concept that should be added to the model.” Coders worked individually and presented their own “themes from the interview” each week. This activity formed the basis of discussion about potential new ideas. When more than one coder identified a major or minor idea not reflected in or inconsistent with the model (or when one person identified an idea that others concurred was present although they did not note it) there was then discussion about how to modify the model to reflect this new idea. Weekly meetings typically produced new issues that needed attention, and the project coordinator kept a record of these developments.

The first author was present at most meetings as a consultant, but deferred to the team’s judgment and made it clear that he was not interested in defending the current model, only in testing and revising it in order to have it better reflect the data. Coders indicated that when the first author happily and repeatedly made changes to the model in response to coder input and questioning, they felt free to critique the model and suggest changes. Indeed, many revisions were made to the model including four major changes/additions and at least twenty minor ones.

During the coding process, we also added a sub-category that involved challenges of living one’s faith. Many respondents discussed the related difficulties such as demands on time, finances, avoiding hypocrisy, being very different (a special challenge for youth), facing bigotry and prejudice, and overcoming personal weaknesses.

**Stage 2: Testing and confirming the model**

The second stage involved testing the revised model with data gathered by the second author from families in the Mid-Atlantic States (DE, MD, and PA). There were several key similarities in the two samples and in the procedures used to gather data: both samples consisted of highly religious families; both interviewers were Latter-day Saint (Mormon), white, married fathers; and many of the questions were similar. Yet, this second wave of data was
gathered by a different interviewer, in different states, employed some unique questions, and more frequently asked respondents to share specific examples to illustrate concepts the families mentioned as meaningful. In addition, the interviewing method used differed.

The New England data were gathered by interviewing couples together and then interviewing parents and children together. However, most of the mid-Atlantic data were gathered by interviewing married couples separately (except with Muslim families, where this was considered inappropriate). It was felt that these differences between wave 1 and wave 2 did not weaken but actually strengthened the methodology since these differences presumably would allow for a broader array of concepts to emerge and therefore provide an additional test of the model.

In spite of the first author’s continual urging for coders to subject the model to rigorous testing and asking a variety of probing, “challenge-the-model” questions each week, the coders did not identify any major ideas or concepts that were not included in the model that had been revised by the first coding team. Only minor word changes were made to better reflect the data. Four of the original coders (and the project coordinator) later coded a third wave of new data (from the South), but changes and adjustments were minimal.

**Qualitative Validity and Reliability**

The often-raised issue of adequate validity and reliability in qualitative research calls for a brief discussion of the qualitative issues of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Denzin 1994; Lincoln and Guba 1985) in relation to our study.

*Credibility* refers to the fit between the participant’s intended meaning and the researcher’s interpretation and coding of participant statements. Gilgun has summarized this concern in the question, “Am I communicating what my informants are telling me?” (1992:28). We contend that to communicate informants’ experience credibly, the researcher needs to have first-hand contact with the informants themselves. One practice used in this study to increase credibility was *persistent observation* (Dienhart 1998), which was maintained through the authors’ first-hand involvement throughout the interview process. More specifically, the authors personally conducted about three-fourths of the interviews and did the initial analyses themselves (as opposed to delegating most or all of these time-intensive tasks).

The qualitative hallmark of *transferability* refers to the effort to ensure that “a given explanation fits a given description” (Janesick 1994: 216). Our concern with transferability (*i.e.*, “Do our coding and model building efforts fit and represent the data?”) led us to seek the assistance of the nine students to test our model, as described above. We found that some areas of our coding and modeling were “transferable” while others were not. Ultimately, however, we were able to adapt and adjust the model to a point where it seemed to be explaining most of the processes reflected by the qualitative data.

*Confirmability* is a key element of qualitative methods’ parallel to quantitative methods’ standard that the researcher maintain objectivity. Many who embrace qualitative methodology disagree with the ontological and epistemological bases of the objectivist ideal and argue for an acknowledgement of researcher reflexivity instead (Miles and Huberman 1994). However, regardless of a researcher’s stance in the subjectivity-objectivity debate, all data should be traceable or confirmable to the original source. In compliance with this standard of *confirmability*, all data reported in this paper are available in their original form on audio cassette or digital audio, as well as in transcribed hard copy. Additionally, a data trail com-
posed of hard copies containing initial coding and analyses of the interviews has been kept by the authors.

In sum, although qualitative research does not have precise parallels to quantitative standards of reliability and validity, the standards we mention above do resemble inter-rater reliability (i.e., two researchers, nine independent students), parallel-forms reliability (i.e., we used similar but non-identical questions posed by different researchers in different regions), internal validity (credibility), external validity (transferability), and objectivity (confirmability) (cf. Trochim 2000). Further, while our purposive sampling cannot be directly compared with random or representative sampling, we were intentionally systematic in sampling by gender, region, and SES, while purposively oversampling families of color, as discussed next.

SAMPLES

As noted, samples for this research were drawn from three major waves of data collection. Instead of independently describing all three samples, we discuss the characteristics of the combined sample for clarity and parsimony. The total sample analyzed to date consists of 195 participants (74 mothers, 74 fathers, and 47 adolescent children) from 74 families.

The Christian families included nineteen Conservative Protestant families (fifteen Baptist, one Missionary and Alliance, three Pentecostal); ten Mainline Protestant families (two Episcopal, one Congregational, one Lutheran, six Methodist); seven Catholic families; five non-denominational Christian families; and three New Christian Religions (two Jehovah's Witness, one Seventh-day Adventist). The twelve Jewish families included two Hasidic families, two Modern Orthodox families, six Conservative families, and two Reformed families. There were also nine Latter-day Saint (Mormon) and nine Muslim families. On the average, parents in these families attended religious services more than once a week, spent about ten hours a week in religious activities, and donated eight per cent of their incomes to their faith communities (donations varied widely across faiths).

Given the degree of religious diversity in the United States (Melton 2003), the immense complexities of adequately addressing both family and religious diversity in contemporary society (Dollahite et al. 2004), and given that the Abrahamic (Christian, Jewish, Mormon, and Muslim) faiths have some broad similarities in how deity is viewed (monotheistic) and the centrality of marriage and family, we limited our sample to these faiths. We have discovered that the challenge of accurately representing a faith, even one's own, is acute (Dollahite 2003; Marks and Dollahite 2001). Therefore, it was with some trepidation that we moved from a tradition familiar to us (Mormon) to novel (i.e., Jewish, Muslim) research ground. In our efforts to better understand these faiths, we personally attended many faith community services and activities for these religions and studies their primary sacred texts. In this paper our focus is in on commonalities across faiths.

Forty of the 74 families were Caucasian (54%), 18 African American (24%), five Hispanic/Latino (7%), five Middle Eastern (7%), three East Indian (4%), two Asian American (3%), and one family was Native American (1%). Thus, nearly half (46%) of the respondents were members of an ethnic or racial minority.

Since our scholarly interests center on marriage, family, and religion, we chose to interview only religiously active, married (or remarried) couples with children. Couples were
typically in their mid-forties and had been married an average of about 20 years. All couples had at least one child (mean = 3.3). Forty-seven adolescents (28 girls, 19 boys) were interviewed, ranging in age from 10-20 years old (mean = 16 years).

PROCEDURES

Most participants were recruited through recommendations made by religious leaders who identified families in their congregation who might be willing to be interviewed and were deemed to be strong in their families and their faith. All interviews (except for 14 Mid-Atlantic interviews) were conducted with parents together. All interviews with youth were conducted with the parents and youth together, and nearly all were conducted in homes. Interviews typically lasted about two hours; interview questions addressed the ways that family members felt their religion influenced their marriage and family life, their parenting, and their sense of identity. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using qualitative methods of classifying and coding statements into categories that captured the major themes expressed by respondents (cf. Marks 2004, 2005).

CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF HOW HIGHLY RELIGIOUS FAMILIES STRIVE TO FULFILL SACRED PURPOSES

Figure 1 presents a conceptual model of the contexts, processes, and outcomes associated with religious families striving together to fulfill their “sacred purposes.” While not exhaustive, the model presents central contexts, processes, and outcomes we discovered in these data. Given space limitations and the relative lack of focus on process in previous

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**Figure 1. The Contexts, Processes, and Outcomes of Families Striving to FulfILL Sacred Purposes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contexts</th>
<th>Family Processes</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Spiritual Convictions &amp; Religious Involvement</td>
<td>Striving Together to FulfILL Sacred Purposes</td>
<td>Personal, Marital, Family, &amp; Community “Blessings”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spiritual Beliefs</td>
<td>• Relying on God or God’s word for support, guidance, strength</td>
<td>Peace, Health, Identity</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Sanctifying family by living religion at home (traditions)</td>
<td>meaning; physical, mental, emotional</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Resolving conflict with prayer, repentance, &amp; forgiveness</td>
<td>health; longevity; comfort; guidance;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Loving &amp; serving others in family, faith community, &amp; wider community</td>
<td>gratitude; growth; confidence;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Overcoming challenges &amp; trials through shared faith</td>
<td>fulfillment</td>
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<td>Religious Expectations</td>
<td>• Abstaining from proscribed activities &amp; substances</td>
<td>Marital Trust &amp; Happiness</td>
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<tr>
<td>Congregational, familial, generational,</td>
<td>• Sacrificing time, money, comfort &amp; convenience</td>
<td>fidelity; commitment; resolved</td>
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<tr>
<td>personal expectations regarding religious</td>
<td>• Nurturing spiritual observance &amp; growth through teaching, example, &amp; discussion</td>
<td>conflict; harmony; shared vision;</td>
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<tr>
<td>life &amp; practice including ritual, tradition,</td>
<td>• Obeying God, prophets, parents, commandments</td>
<td>stability; intimacy; respect; role</td>
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<tr>
<td>observance, &amp; abstinence</td>
<td>• Putting faith &amp; family ahead of personal &amp; secular interests</td>
<td>clarity</td>
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<td>Faith Community</td>
<td></td>
<td>Family Unity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Worship; contributions; organizational</td>
<td></td>
<td>kindness; stability; security;</td>
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<td>involvement; service &amp; support; moral</td>
<td></td>
<td>happiness; satisfaction; love;</td>
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<td>obligations &amp; opportunities</td>
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<td>coherence; shared purpose</td>
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<td>Extended Family</td>
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<td>Religious support &amp; example; familial</td>
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<td>religious identity; legacy of faith &amp; observance</td>
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research and theory building, we focus our discussion on processes and make only cursory comments about contexts and outcomes. Interview excerpts that illustrate the ten key religion-family processes are included.

**Contexts: Spiritual Convictions and Religious Involvement**

Four aspects of spiritual convictions and religious involvement provided the context for the families as they strived to fulfill sacred purposes:

**Spiritual beliefs** include religious ideas, ideals, intentions, convictions, and attributions; doctrines; sacred meanings and goals; and grace. While institutionalized beliefs can be influential, we found that for many of the families we interviewed formal doctrine was not as salient as was a sense of personal relationship or connection with God.

**Religious expectations** include congregational, familial, generational, and personal expectations regarding religious life and practice; including ritual, tradition, observance, and abstinence. Examples include expectations regarding sacred rituals and traditions; prayer; study; holy days; vows and covenants; religion-based abstinence and sacrifice. Religious expectations pertain to practices or behavioral observances that adherents are expected to abide by as members of a faith community. Although these expectations regarding practice work together to form a context, we conceptualize the actual practices themselves as processes, as discussed later.

**Faith community** includes public worship, financial and temporal contributions, organizational involvement, offering service and support, meeting faith community obligations, and accepting opportunities to be part of something “bigger” than the self and family.

**Extended family** includes ongoing religious support and encouragement provided by family of origin or other extended family, but can also include religious identity and a legacy of faithfulness or religious observance that is bestowed on the present generation by previous ones.

**Family Process: The Missing Bridge between Religious Contexts and Family Outcomes**

Little is known about the processes that operate between contexts and developmental or relational outcomes. Metaphorically speaking, correlative data link some departure points with certain arrival points, but these data offer little insight regarding what the journey-related experiences mean to the families involved (Palkovitz, Marks, Appleby, and Holmes 2003). However, some recent research has begun to look more carefully at the processes whereby religiosity influences marriage and family life. Examples include studies of how religious belief and practice promote health and well-being in African-American families (Marks, Nesteruk, Swanson, Garrison, and Davis 2005), promote fidelity in marriage (Dollahite and Lambert 2007), help couples avoid, resolve, and reconcile post-marital conflict (Lambert and Dollahite 2006), increase commitment in marriage (Lambert and Dollahite, forthcoming), allow married couples to include God in their marriage (Goodman and Dollahite 2006), and facilitate meaningful conversations between parents and children (Dollahite and Thatcher, forthcoming).

In connection with meanings and motives, Emmons (1999) reports that “spiritual strivings” are central to personality in most people and that spiritual strivings toward ultimate concerns can give meaning and power to all other goals. Day (2003) similarly states that families also have shared goals that they strive to achieve and further defines family process-
es as strategies families use to achieve these goals. Consistent with the work of both Emmons and Day, our research indicates that these highly religious families have central “spiritual strivings” or sacred purposes that they work together to achieve.

Our interests center on qualitatively exploring process-oriented, “how and why” questions and in developing a theory that describes our findings (Bengtson et al. 2005). Our research further indicates that much of religion’s reported power lies in sacred familial processes that take place primarily out of public view, on “the other six days of the week.” In short, our work supports and extends ideas proposed by Emmons (1999) and Day (2003) regarding the importance of attending to family processes used to achieve valued objectives. The processes we discuss next represent a portion of the largely unconstructed empirical and theoretical bridge between religious contexts and family outcomes.

In our research and model, we explore the religious and relational processes in everyday personal, marital, and family life because this is where faith and family life intersect in both prosaic and profound ways. Next, we present ten such processes and briefly illustrate each of them with examples from our interviews with highly religious families. Typically, when presenting supportive qualitative data, we offer interpretations and suggest several connections and interrelationships. In this article, however, we have presented the data with minimal commentary, thereby allowing readers to draw their own connections.

Family process 1: Relying on God or God’s word for support, guidance, and strength involves looking to and relying on God in ways that are intended to provide aid, strength, and healing to family relationships. Turning to God often includes prayer, reading sacred texts together to understand God’s will, or attending worship services together. Examples from our study included a Catholic family saying the Rosary or Novenas (prayers of gratitude) together, a Muslim family in their home turning toward Mecca to pray, and an Evangelical Christian family reading the Bible together around the kitchen table. Other examples include the following:

*(Muslim father) Ali:* [P]art of my job as a father is to ask my Lord for forgiveness and guidance for me and my family, because if we can’t get along, we got to ask for God’s assistance. We’ve got to ask for His help. We have to beg Him for His help, and His aid, we have to receive His guid[ance]. . . . I pray to Him for guidance for myself and my family and for everyone around me...

*(Congregational mother) Abby:* [O]ften I find myself praying for the qualities that I need to make this marriage and this family here work. Often I need courage. Often I need patience, often I need ability to be more loving and understanding. And I’m often . . . asking for those kinds of assistances, or those kind of teachings, or leadings, or guidings because that’s [what I need].

*(Latino Catholic father) Carlos:* I pray. . . . for guidance on how to resolve other problems. I pray for spiritual guidance. I pray for patience. I pray for [God to] allow me to see how . . . to avoid problems, avoid losing my patience, [and] how to help my children be better persons.

These narratives illustrate ways in which many of the families we interviewed strive to rely on God or God’s word for support, guidance, and strength.

Family process 2: Sanctifying the family by living religion at home involves integrating religious ideas and ideals into home and family life so religion is not compressed solely into a place of worship or into a single day of the week. Sanctifying the family also includes creating sacred times, places, and meanings at home by setting aside times for home-based religious activities such as Sabbath day observance, prayers, or reading sacred texts together, as well as finding sacred meaning in daily domestic activities. Examples included an
A Conceptual Model of Family and Religious Processes in Highly Religious Families

Orthodox Jewish family keeping a kosher home to fulfill the Torah, a Muslim family observing the month-long Ramadan fast together to honor Allah, and many Christian families who said grace each evening at dinner. Other examples included the following:

(Jewish mother) Sarah: When we take the time out, when we light the candles Friday night, that’s a time that I feel really close to (my children).... I always say a prayer of thanks for my children.... When we sit across the table from each other, my husband and I, and the Sabbath candles are lit, and I see the kids, there is something I get from that that is so deep. It’s just a feeling that [all is right in the world]...it doesn’t matter what else is going on. Right in that circle...it’s awe-inspiring.

(LDS mother) Aida: Family home evening is a meeting we have—the whole family, parents and the children. We have the meeting every week, we sing a hymn, and we have a prayer. My husband or I will prepare a short lesson or teaching from the gospel and [then] our older daughter Maria will retell the lesson in her words. This has had a tremendous impact on her [and her younger sister].

(Muslim father) Khalid: We have five prayers a day [in Islam]...and once a day I get the kids to pray with me, in the evening time.... [This is the central activity for our daily life. We start our day in the morning with a prayer, we pray all during the day, and there’s one in the evening time.... At prayer time, we say to] the kids, “Let’s quit the TV, and pray.”...[So at] the end of the day I have my kids around me and [I] thank God that they are healthy and safe.... My intention [is]: I’m caring about my wife and my kids because my God asked me to care about them....my God asked me to do that.

These narratives illustrate ways in which the families we interviewed strive to sanctify their family by living religion at home.

Family process 3: Resolving conflict with prayer, repentance, and forgiveness involves utilizing religious thought, word, and action to address relational conflicts through praying alone or together, expressing sorrow for actions against God and others, and forgiving others (including family members) for wrongs they have committed. Religious conflict resolution seems to differ from secular approaches in that there is a sense that God expects family members to repent and to forgive. Examples included an African Methodist Episcopal couple holding hands and praying for God to bless their marriage and to forgive them for being cruel to each other, or a Catholic family experiencing a transcendent healing moment while standing together at Mass singing a hymn of forgiveness. Other examples included the following:

(Non-denominational Christian) Jessica: We have disagreements [in our marriage], we have things we don’t see the same sometimes, and faith is a source of help. We can pray about things together and the Lord can help us work things out. Sometimes one person has to give in and accept the other person’s point of view; it helps to be able to pray about things. The Lord, He’s the best counselor you could ever have. I don’t know how marriages can work without God. I’m sure that there are people who are so compatible that they can still get along but (our faith) has been really helpful [for us].

(Jewish 17 year-old daughter) Naomi: The founder of the Hasidic Shul where we go in New York [said], “On Shabbas you apologize to your children. You ask for their forgiveness, for if you, God forbid, yelled at them any time during the week, so that they thought that you didn’t love them...” [My parents have] apologized to me several times....It’s kind of like an underlying concept you know, especially on Friday nights or on Shabbat or on a holiday. We just want Shalom bayit [peace in the house], [if there are problems, we think] let’s...resolve this.

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(Muslim father) Yusif: [If] you get into arguments or you have a fight, you must always remember the favor that Allah has given you in your spouse, and a blessing. And therefore, you try to forgive people more. And also, if in a weak moment you have wronged the other party by a harsh word or something like that, you ask their forgiveness, and you ask Allah’s forgiveness over it. And at all times, when you’re trying to be better, as the Prophet, peace be upon him, taught us, he said: “The best among you is the one who is best to his...spouse.”

(Baptist father) Shawn: You know, I’ve had to ask my kids for forgiveness. So I hope that that would at least be one evidence that they could say [that] we’re real people. We haven’t got it all together, but we can accept and love each other because we extend the forgiveness of God and the grace of God to each other. And we each know that we need it desperately.

These narratives illustrate ways in which many of the families we interviewed strive to resolve conflict with prayer, repentance, and forgiveness.

Family process 4: Loving and serving others in the family, faith community, and wider community involves acts of service done by family members (as individuals, pairs, or as a group) on behalf of others in the family, faith community, or larger community (e.g., feeding the poor, building or repairing homes, working for peace, and working with disabled persons). Some examples of this process included a Methodist family working together in a community outreach program for the needy, a family helping a fellow Muslim family find housing, an LDS couple working together at a church facility to package food for the poor, or a Jewish family making and delivering treats to neighbors for Purim. Other examples included the following:

(Jehovah’s Witness father) Mark: The direction that we have for marriage is that I live for Gayle, and Gayle lives for me, in the marriage. We don’t live for ourselves. My role is to serve the family, her role is to serve the family. So [service is] just our God-given role.

(Seventh-day Adventist mother) Carmen: [Kids need to be taught] that this life isn’t just about them. They’re not the sun [so that] everything revolves around them. You know, God is there and they are living to serve Him and the fellow human beings on this planet. [Our daughter recently] said to somebody, “Well, Mom’s out to save the world and she expects us to help her do it.” [Well], you’re not here for yourself. You’re here to help others. You’re here to do, to live your life for God’s service and for other people.

(Congregational father) Jake: Actually another thing that I hadn’t mentioned yet is that for the past eight years, my son Clint and I have volunteered at the soup kitchen that’s in our church every Saturday, just about, for about eight or ten years.

Abby [Jake’s wife]: That’s more like charity, or love, loving the poor. Jake really resonates with, you know, feeding the hungry, taking, serving the poor...

Jake: It’s been a wonderful thing for Clint [son, 19] to get involved in as well.

Abby: It’s service, I think is a real big part of...our faith, beliefs and community. But I mean, I think we both want to serve. Serve others, our children, and our families and community.

These narratives illustrate ways in which many of the families we interviewed strive to love and serve others in the family, faith community, and wider community.

Family process 5: Overcoming challenges and trials through shared faith involves families attempting to cope with life’s adversities through their religious beliefs, practices, and communities. Consistent with previous research, our work demonstrates that our families relied heavily on religious resources in coping with challenges, and that these resources are subsequently important to their marital and family well-being. Examples included fami-
ilies gathered with others in a prayer vigil after the tragedies of September 11, 2001, in New York City; a Pentecostal couple getting serious about their faith to help them avoid a divorce; and a Jewish family mourning the loss of a grandfather and saying Kaddish each Sabbath in his memory to “keep his faith alive in them.” Additional examples included:

*(Korean Christian father) Oui:* Personally, I don’t get stressed too much, even during difficult times. Usually I focus on looking [to] Jesus Christ…that helps me to calm down and to feel better…. Most people at my old company [which was just bought out] are worried because they are laid off. [I am laid off but] I am still quite happy. I can still pray and we can still do our [volunteer] job for the church. We don’t know what God’s will is for our family. But we believe that God will lead our family to a good way. That’s really helpful once we hit difficult times.

*(Jewish mother) Rebecca:* [When] my father passed away…that was probably the biggest challenge of my life…. I mean, it was just an automatic thing to go to synagogue and to look at death from a Jewish perspective…. I mean, that’s Judaism’s strength…. I think that after September 11, with the [terrorist] attack, we instinctively went to synagogue the next Friday night and it was packed. I think that’s just how we cope.

*(Catholic mother) Mercy:* I don’t think we believe that we’d be together anymore [in our marriage] if we didn’t have God in the middle…. If we didn’t have God, I don’t think we would have been able to get through our struggles intact…. I think having common vision [helps].

*Jared [Mercy’s husband]:* Yeah,…23 years later, we wouldn’t be together if it weren’t for the presence of God in our marriage.

*(African Methodist father) Rashaad:* I believe that my faith made me love my wife a lot more. We are very different. If it weren’t for faith, I probably would have run a long time ago…. But when you believe in God…yes, the boat still gets to rockin’ but the Bible says, “In me you can weather the storm.”

These narratives illustrate ways in which many of the families we interviewed strive to overcome challenges and trials through shared faith.

**Family process 6: Abstaining from proscribed activities and substances** involves avoiding activities and substances prohibited by one’s faith. Examples included a Muslim family abstaining from alcohol, a Jehovah’s Witness family not participating in Christmas or birthday celebrations, a Seventh-day Adventist family abstaining from meat, and a newly converted Mormon husband struggling to overcome drug addiction. Other examples included:

*(Muslim 17 year-old daughter) Maryam:* I think having this religion keeps me from wanting to assimilate myself to the secular society with all the drinking and the drugs, and sex before marriage. Going out to all these clubs, and things like that. It keeps me from wanting that…because I’m able to see…what harm it causes people. I don’t really see any goodness in it [and] I see that I’m much happier without it.

*(LDS Mother) Heidi:* The Word of Wisdom, the health code that we believe in is—we believe it was—inspired. It protects us from addiction, from a lot of the problems that come from alcohol and tobacco use. I think it’s a source of protection. I would also say [it’s a source of] peace.

*(Muslim father) Omar:* At work, our offices look out on to the parking lot. Every morning, all the engineers gather into this one guy’s cubicle at 7:45 and say, “Ah, look what she’s wearing. She looks good!” Typical, it’s a normal thing between guys. But by saying these things you are degrad-
ing that woman, you are gossiping. Knowing that these things will be written [in my heavenly book] prevents me from [participating] and from that your entire behavior is changed. [Instead], you are sitting in your office doing your work, which is what you are supposed to be doing.

(Baptist 18 year-old daughter) Jill: [O]ne thing that my faith has made me think about is [that] I want to stay pure until I get married and save myself for my husband. [T]hat's something that's really pretty rare in terms of people who don't have faith that I've seen. And I think it's...the best way to do things, [and] I've got that from my faith....That's very important to me.

These narratives illustrate ways in which many of the individuals and families we interviewed strive to abstain from proscribed activities and substances.

Family process 7: Sacrificing time, money, comfort, and convenience involves personal or family giving of time and substance for religious reasons, including donation of money, food, clothing, and service. Both the parents and children we interviewed spoke of various ways they made sacrifices for their faith and their family and described how this influenced their connections to God and to each other. Examples included an Evangelical Christian family giving time and money for mission work, youth in a Catholic family giving up sleeping or playing soccer on Sunday morning to attend services, a Baptist family giving up many of "the nicer things" to contribute more to their church, a large LDS family paying ten per cent of their income as tithing despite significant economic needs, a Muslim family contributing a significant amount of money as zakah to relieve the suffering of the poor, and an Orthodox Jewish family walking several miles to pray at a synagogue on the Sabbath. The following narratives also illustrate this process:

(Jewish mother) Hannah: There was a period of time where I was spending easily twenty hours a week in volunteer and religious activities [at the synagogue], and at that point I felt it was a sacrifice because that was time that I had to spend on the business and committee end of things. It took away from family time and it was hard...

(Non-denominational Christian father) Joseph: [I]nvolve[ment in [faith] community leadership...costs you a lot of time, it costs you a lot of freedom, it costs you a lot of anonymity....It costs a lot of emotional investment in the well-being of other people beyond just normal friendship and care because as a leader, you have responsibility for their well-being and for speaking into their life...that's costly.

(Muslim father) Khalil: [When my wife made the decision to wear the cover (hijab)] ...nobody would hire her...with a head cover. You tell me, where do you go around here [Louisiana] and see a woman covering her hair, working?...Nobody will hire her. The only place you will see [a covered] woman work[ing] is in the university [where the attitude] is more liberal [and tolerant].

(Evangelical Christian father) Bobby: I've been on three overseas mission trips [and now] I'm going to Africa and Romania. I consider that a sacrifice.

These narratives illustrate ways in which many of the individuals and families we interviewed were willing to sacrifice time, money, comfort, and convenience for their faith.

Family process 8: Nurturing spiritual observance and growth through teaching, example, and discussion involves efforts by family members to encourage the observance and development of spirituality through teaching religious values, "practicing what you preach," and engaging in discussions about the meanings, purposes, importance, complexities, joys, and challenges of religious and spiritual issues. Research, including our own, shows that
parental teachings, example, and dialogue about religious matters are important predictors of whether children come to happily endorse the faith of their parents, a major sacred objective for most highly religious parents. Examples of nurturing spiritual observance and growth included a Jewish family newly committed to Orthodox observance teaching and discussing the challenges and joys of greater religious observance, a Latino Catholic family talking around the table about the meaning of the Rosary, an African American couple responding to their adolescent daughter’s questions about racial discrimination in a congregation, and many who spoke about the importance of “being a good example” for children. Additional examples follow:

(Jewish mother) Ruthie: There’s also the [Jewish] rules to live by...which we talk about a lot and try to teach the kids. It comes up every day, how do you conduct yourself?...Someone sent me a check for a [physician’s] dinner I didn’t attend for $250. I said to the kids, “I got his check, wouldn’t it be great to keep this check?” Then I said, “I’m calling the drug company and returning the check even though they would never miss the check.” We try constantly to teach them these lessons...of how you conduct yourself in life ethically....

(Non-denominational Christian father) Joseph: I mean if you believe that there’s a God and you believe that it’s the most important thing in the universe how you relate to Him, then the most important thing in parenting is to raise your kids in a way that faith is going to be real, meaningful and attractive to them in a way that they can understand it and deal with it....Your kids live with you, they see you. They see if this is a Sunday morning thing or a 24-7 thing. When Dad slams his thumb in the car door, what does he do? When something goes wrong, does he freak out [or] does he have faith?

(Muslim mother) Aisha: I think it’s real important too, to understand that there’s no compulsion in Islam. [T]eaching your children, educating them is the key for a mother in Islam, and I think understanding that you can only...enjoin what is good, forbid what is wrong. And [I] hope and pray that they could go on the right path, [but we are] taught that in Islam that there is no compulsion. But we also teach them that, for every good you do there’s a reward, for every bad you do there’s punishment. And so that really gives balance in their life...once they understand that for every action they do, they’re accountable.

(African Methodist father) Rashaad: We can clap the right “Hallelujah” and say the right words and everybody sees, but when no one that’s in your church sees you, how are you acting then? Hmmm?...Are you living the...walk of faith...or are you living like the world’s living? I can’t say it any [plain]er than that.... Are you practicing what you preach?

These narratives illustrate ways in which many of the families we interviewed strive to nurture spiritual observance and growth through teaching, example, and discussion.

Family process 9: Obeying God, prophets, parents, or commandments involves following obedience for religious reasons. Examples included Jewish families keeping or moving toward keeping kosher homes, Muslim families obeying the commandment to fast during Ramadan, and a Jehovah’s Witness family obeying their religion’s directive to not participate in celebrations. Additional “obedience” narratives include:

(Jewish mother) Debra: I feel my Jewishness very strongly. I am aware of it frequently throughout the day, conscious of it all the time. The moment I awaken, I say a prayer in my mind; that’s something that I started doing about a year ago. Part of the reason for keeping kosher, in my mind, is to constantly remind yourself that you are following God’s commandment and that you’re keep-
ing your word to follow His law.... It comes up a lot for me during the day because I am surrounded by people who aren’t Jewish.

(African Methodist, 16 year-old daughter) Jasmine: Whenever we’re fighting, somewhere looming in the back of my mind is: “Children, honor your parents, for this is right.” And even though I try to ignore it and push it [out], I know...at some point I need to go and talk to them and say, “I’m sorry,” even though I was right, I shouldn’t have expressed it the way that I did, because that’s not bringing honor to [my parents].

(Muslim father) Ibrahim: We truly believe that God’s guidance is really central to faith and kids. [A] lot of guidelines and rules have been determined about what is the right way to raise your children. And we try to follow them as much as we can.

These narratives illustrate ways in which many of the individuals and families we interviewed strive to obey God, prophets, parents, or commandments.

Family process 10: Putting faith or family ahead of personal or secular interests involves making decisions based on the priority of one’s religious beliefs, practices, or commitment to one’s family as well as struggling against societal, cultural, or other pressures to place other things ahead of commitments to faith and family life. Examples included Muslim women and girls wearing hijab (head covers) in spite of stares and taunts, a Christian family who chose to spend their summer vacations helping at a camp for high-risk youth, and a Jewish mother and father who moved out of their country “dream house” to a less ideal home close to their synagogue so their children would be more integrated in the Jewish community. Other examples of putting faith and family first include the following:

(Orthodox Jewish father) Efra: Some people get...new things all the time. We don’t. We’d rather put our money for...our highest priority. Our highest priority was giving our kids the best Jewish education we could, no matter what the cost.
Naomi [Efra’s wife]: ...[but] tuition is high, and you have to constantly sacrifice...

(Congregational father) Jake: [There’s a religious dimension to the conscious choice that I have made to emphasize my commitment to my family over my commitment to career. As I mentioned, I downsized my job two and a half years ago [to be with the family more].

(LDS mother) Tara: Talking about the Lord intervening in our marriage, there was a point a few years back where there was a lot of stress for a lot of reasons, in our marriage, in our family...nothing really terrible, but we were just so busy all the time....[We] were able to see that we needed to be able to spend more time together. And we started going out on dates more frequently, and just putting a lot more emphasis on our relationship....It was just very clear that God was trying to help us understand that we had to put [our priorities in order].

(Seventh-day Adventist father) Ed: [My faith] helps me...to discern what to do with my time or to... It affects the way I use my time. I have the opportunities to do all kinds of things outside the family. You know, my employer has all kinds of sports leagues I could be participating in. My fellow employees have all kinds of extra curricular activities that I would be more than welcome to join. But...I don’t take advantage of those opportunities. I believe that my focus needs to be on the family.

These narratives illustrate ways in which many of the families we interviewed strive to put faith and family ahead of personal or secular interests.
Outcomes: Personal, Marital, Family, and Community “Blessings”

Here we identify, but do not discuss, four beneficial outcomes repeatedly found in the literature on religion and family (Dollahite et al. 2004; Marks 2004), and in this research. Outcomes related to individual, marital, familial, and community are listed, respectively.

Peace, health, and identity includes a sense of meaning; improved physical, mental, and emotional health; longevity; comfort, guidance, hope for the future; growth; gratitude; confidence; fulfillment; understanding; and a faith-based sense of identity.

Marital trust and happiness includes increased fidelity, commitment, harmony, common values, resolved conflict, shared vision, marital stability, intimacy, respect, role clarity, shared purpose, and transcendence.

Family unity includes kindness, stability, security, happiness, satisfaction, love, coherence, shared purpose, together time, support, deep care or concern for another family member or extended family.

Community supportiveness and connection includes social, temporal, and spiritual support in “faith family”; models across the life course; and deep, long-term relationships of care with members of the faith community.

Linkages between Contexts, Processes, and Outcomes

Our research, and therefore the model, suggests that religious people draw from their religious contexts to direct, inform, evaluate, and correct their lives—especially their marriage and family relationships and daily living—and that they believe that when they do this consistently and well there are a range of positive things that result from this process. Mahoney et al. (2001) found that most scholarship in this area has focused on the empirical links between religiosity broadly defined (e.g., church affiliation and attendance) and relational outcomes broadly defined (e.g., marital stability and satisfaction). With some exceptions, what have been largely ignored are the intermediate processes that link these two domains. Since our work attempts to bridge that gap our model highlights the central role that religious processes play. These processes include behavioral practices but also include the ways that people think and feel about religious beliefs, expectations, and communities and how they translate their faith into lived familial experience.

Summary and Assessment of the Conceptual Model

Comparisons with quantitative approaches. We developed, tested, and refined the conceptual model with qualitative data as the major influence. The best large-scale quantitative studies on religion and family life and the models drawn from them rely on careful operationalization of variables and rigorous analyses of data from a large number of randomly selected subjects. However, even the best of these large-scale studies tend to be limited to relatively few questions on religion and family life and thus have provided mostly a distal view of these linkages with great difficulty in determining directionality of influence (Mahoney et al. 2001). In addition to the fact that respondents in survey research are not able to provide information beyond what is asked for by the survey, the majority of those in large-scale survey research may not have much to say about any given set of questions asked. Finally, most survey research involves only adults, and often a disproportionate amount of data is provided by women.

In contrast, our study and model draw from data gathered from in-depth interviews with a large number of women (74), men (74), and adolescent respondents (47) who were select-
ed because they were likely to have things to say about the connections between religion and family life. Study respondents provided in-depth answers to questions about the various ways their religious beliefs, practices, and communities were linked to their marriage and family. Thus, rather than having to infer causal linkages based on theory and statistical correlations between variables, our study directly asked families to discuss connections and influences between their faith and their family life.

**Comparison with other qualitative approaches.** By comparison to extant qualitative work in the area of religion and family, our sample is unique. Most qualitative studies on religion focus on small samples of one faith community (e.g., Davidman 1991), only mothers (e.g., Kaufman 1993; Stacey and Gerard 1990), or only men (e.g., Dollahite 2003). Our study includes data on marriage from both wives and husbands, and data on parent-child relationships from mothers, fathers, and adolescents, offering three-dimensional, whole-family views.

In addition to the fact that our sample included highly religious laypersons from a diversity of faith communities as well as dramatically differing degrees of “orthodoxy” and “conservatism” both within and between faiths, our sample was racially, educationally, and economically diverse, and included families from several major regions of the United States.

**Strengths of the model.** The model provides a detailed picture of the kinds of processes that highly religious families engage in to fulfill the purposes suggested by their religious beliefs. We think the model has the advantage of being both simple (with three major factors of contexts, processes, and outcomes), yet detailed within each major factor. We hope this combination will suggest research questions about ways that contexts, processes, and outcomes relate in families.

**Limitations of the model.** Although these data reflect a broad and diverse sample of highly religious families, it is important to mention that we did not interview families (a) with religiously mixed marriages, or (b) those who had become disillusioned with their faith, nor, we assume, (c) families with current clinical dysfunction in marital or parent-child relationships. Our rationale in only interviewing highly religious families is based in Boss’ (1999) research and conceptual work that forwards the notion that to best understand a concept or phenomenon, one should investigate prototypical samples. In short, to best understand why religion influences some families, it seemed cogent to interview families who were highly involved (versus nominally or marginally religious families). A subsequent consequence of our focus on families that were currently involved with and positively disposed to their faiths is that the model fails to capture “the dark side” of religious experience adequately. A different sample would be needed to address this important issue in sufficient depth and complexity (cf. Arterburn and Felton 2001). Two final limitations that must be noted include our failure to include non-Abrahamic world religions (e.g., Hindu, Buddhist, and Shinto) and non-nuclear families. Research data in both of these domains are badly needed.

**CONCLUSION**

It is important to reiterate that this is not a representative sample. It is a purposive sample of highly religious families designed to explore, illuminate, and explain the experience of this significant but understudied group. Miller and Thorensen (2003) indicate that a “significant minority of Americans” reports their religion as life’s most important influence, but that there is a paucity of data and theory that address the highly religious at the family
level. The 74 families in this study have provided an initial bridge between religious contexts and family outcomes.

In conclusion, the sacred processes and purposes illustrated in this paper comprise collective explanations regarding why religious faith may be the most significant influence in personal and family life for these American families and others like them.

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NOTES

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1Mormonism (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) is a Christian faith but it is addressed separately in this paper due to its distinct practices and beliefs (Dollahite 2003) and the argument by a leading sociologist of religion that Mormonism should be studied as a “new world faith” (Stark 1984).

2All names have been changed.

REFERENCES


A Conceptual Model of Family and Religious Processes in Highly Religious Families


