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### How Does Religion Influence Marriage? Christian, Jewish, Mormon, and Muslim Perspectives

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# How Does Religion Influence Marriage? Christian, Jewish, Mormon, and Muslim Perspectives

Loren Marks

**ABSTRACT.** Seventy-six highly religious Christian, Jewish, Mormon, and Muslim married mothers and fathers were interviewed regarding how and why three dimensions of religion (i.e., faith community, religious practices, and spiritual beliefs) influence marriage in both beneficial and challenging ways. Through qualitative data analysis the author identified eight emergent themes that link religion and marriage: (1) the influence of clergy, (2) the mixed blessing of faith community service and involvement, (3) the importance of prayer, (4) the connecting influence of family ritual, (5) practicing marital fidelity, (6) pro-marriage/anti-divorce beliefs, (7) homogeneity of religious beliefs, and (8) faith in God as a marital support. Qualitative data are presented in connection with each theme, and clinical implications are offered. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

**KEYWORDS.** Christian, Jewish, marriage, Mormon, Muslim, religion

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## INTRODUCTION

Barna polls, General Social Surveys, and studies from the Princeton Religious Research Center all indicate that about 90% of Americans report a belief in God or a higher power (Stark & Finke, 2000) and 60% say religion is “important” or “very important” to them (McCullough et al., 2000). Even so, determining the influence of such beliefs in the context of marriage and family is a complex endeavor. Several recent reviews discuss correlations between religiosity and family relationships (Christiano, 2000; Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman, 2004; Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001), but social science offers little explanation of the “whys,” “hows,” processes, and meanings behind recurring correlations (Dollahite & Marks, 2005). Research specifically addressing the marriage-religion connection has yielded correlations between religiosity and marital quality, stability, and satisfaction but explanations of these relationships are rare and often include Christian-only samples (Dollahite et al., 2004).

### *Statement of Issue*

The correlation-rich but explanation-poor state of the field elicits the question, “*How and why* does religious involvement influence marriage?” More specifically, what are the attributed challenges, benefits, and meanings? What can we learn from or about such marriages and religion that will be valuable to clinicians, family scholars, family life educators, and clergy?

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Marks and Dollahite (2001) have emphasized that religion is comprised of at least three dimensions: *faith communities* (active participation and involvement in a congregation, synagogue, mosque, etc.), *religious practices* (prayer, rituals, study of sacred texts, etc.), and *spiritual beliefs*. They further argue that all of these need attention if we are to develop a rich, meaningful, and three-dimensional picture of how families are influenced by and draw meaning from religion (Dollahite et al., 2004).

A recent review of religion-family literature discusses several complexities and contradictions in the extant data, though some recurring

correlations also are evident between marital and family satisfaction rankings and all three dimensions of religion (Dollahite et al., 2004). Specific examples include positive correlations between active involvement in a faith community with marital satisfaction (Bahr & Chadwick, 1985; Willits & Crider, 1988) and higher levels of family support (Ellison & George, 1994). However, these findings are largely based on same-faith marriages while comparatively little is known regarding interfaith marriages, except that “same-faith marriages are much more stable than interfaith marriages” (Bahr, 1981, p. 260).

### ***Religious Community, Marriage, and Family***

In connection with the dimension of religious community, Larson and Goltz (1989) found that religious participation is correlated with higher commitment to marriage and increased family satisfaction consistent with earlier findings (Stinnett, 1983). Additionally, a review of the religion and marriage literature by Bahr and Chadwick (1985) found

evidence that religious affiliation and *activity* have a modest positive impact on marriage and family life. . . . To be precise, of the 17 [related] studies published between 1938 and 1980, 13 reported a direct, positive relationship between religiosity and marital satisfaction. (pp. 410-411, emphasis added)

It is important to note that religious affiliation without religious “activity” is not typically a significant factor in marital relationships, while shared or similar religious attendance is a correlate of marital quality and stability (Call & Heaton, 1997; Curtis & Ellison, 2002).

An important confounding factor rarely made explicit in the research linking religiosity with marital and family satisfaction is that most American religions are marriage and family oriented (Agius & Chircop, 1998). Consequently, some apparent influences of religion may be effects of self-selection bias. This confound provides yet another example of the need for work that closely examines the influences, factors, and meanings behind recurring correlations.

### ***Religious Practices, Marriage, and Family***

In connection with the dimension of *religious practices*, religiosity has been consistently associated with lower premarital sexual activity (see Batson, Schoenrade, & Ventis, 1993), but some experts have ar-

gued that strict religious upbringing may also be linked with sexual dysfunction (Masters & Johnson, 1970) and greater sex guilt among married persons (Peterson, 1964). Runkel (1998) similarly has argued that permanent anxiety, guilt, and tension regarding sexuality are prominent in religion and further posits an enmity of sexuality in some religions. Although tensions and prohibitions exist between certain religions and certain expressions of sexuality, some research indicates a main effort of traditional religions is to *channel* sexual expression into marriage, rather than to promote sexual ascetism 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. Religion and marital sexuality will be revisited later in this paper.

### ***Spiritual Beliefs, Marriage, and Family***

Several studies link religiosity (including strong religious beliefs) with increased marital satisfaction and duration, increased commitment and fidelity (e.g., Bahr & Chadwick, 1985; Thomas & Cornwall, 1990), and marital stability (Call & Heaton, 1997). Research also has repeatedly indicated correlations between religious homogamy and marital satisfaction, although the nature of the relationship is not certain (Koenig, McCullough, & Larsen, 2001). In the last decade, a handful of studies have tried to move beyond correlation to determine direction of influence, with mixed results. Booth, Johnson, and Branaman (1995) found that while religiosity did not appear to elevate marital satisfaction, marital satisfaction preceded religious involvement in several cases. By contrast, three qualitative studies of long-term marriages have indicated that similarity in religious orientation (Robinson & Blanton, 1993), religious faith (Robinson, 1994), and religious beliefs (Kaslow & Robinson, 1996) are key factors in long-term marriages (25-50+ years).

Although nature of influence between religious communities, practices, beliefs, and strong, enduring marriages remains ambiguous, the recurring correlations of religiosity with increased marital satisfaction, quality, and stability are of special interest to fathering scholars. This is particularly true in light of Doherty, Kouneski, and Erickson's (1998) conclusions from their literature review on responsible fathering that "the family environment most supportive of fathering is a caring, com-

mitted, collaborative marriage” (p. 286) and that “enduring marital partnerships may be the most important contribution to responsible fathering in our society” (p. 290). A recent book-length study (Waite & Gallagher, 2000) and edited volume (Hawkins, Wardle, & Coolidge, 2002) both address the importance of strong marriages in financial, emotional, medical, and social respects at individual, familial, and federal levels. If marriage is as vital as these studies suggest, we need more information than correlation can offer. We need to know how and why religion influences U.S. marriages and the individuals in them (Marks, 2005; cf. Miller, 2002).

## METHODS

In an effort to closely and qualitatively examine the three dimensions of religion in connection with marriage, the researcher conducted this study between October 2001 and May 2004 in seven different states (DE, MD, LA, PA, OH, OK, and OR).

### *Sample*

Consistent with Pauline Boss’s (1980) approach of studying extremes to gain greater understanding of an issue, a purposive sample of laypersons that were highly involved in their faith communities was selected.<sup>1</sup> Due to my interest in both parenting and marital issues, married parents of school-aged children were interviewed (N = 76; 38 mother-father couples). The Abrahamic world religions of Christianity, Judaism, Mormonism,<sup>2</sup> and Islam were examined. In an effort to have rich, racial diversity in the sample, 32 African-, 7 Arab-, 4 Asian-, 26 Euro-, 5 Hispanic-, and 2 Native Americans were interviewed (including seven immigrant participants to offer some cross-cultural insight). All participants had at least one child under eighteen years of age and parental age ranged between 25-56 years (mean = 41 years). Education levels ranged from not completing high school to PhD/MD. It is probable that the participants were relatively happily married, based on their willingness to be interviewed in depth regarding their marriage and family relationships without compensation.

### *Procedures*

Handel (1996) has indicated that most family research is based on a single informant discussing her view of one relationship in the family.

Handel contends that such studies are not “family research” in the truest sense because, “No member of any family is a sufficient source of information for that family” (p. 346). Consistent with this point, 38 mothers and 38 fathers (N = 76 individuals; 38 families) were interviewed. This allowed me to gather two perspectives on a variety of family relationships including marriage, mother-child, father-child, in-law, and other extended family relationships making the project as a whole more like the family research Handel advocates.

After obtaining informed consent, wives and husbands filled out detailed demographic sheets including information regarding occupation, education, age, income, and related sociodemographics. Participants were then asked 20 open-ended questions relating to themselves, their spouses, and their families, thereby providing three data points (wife reports, husband reports, and researcher observations) consistent with Patton’s (1996) call for increased “triangulation to correct for fallibilities” (p. xxii). A qualitative, narrative-based approach (e.g., Dollahite, Hawkins, & Brotherson, 1996; Josselson & Lieblich, 1993) was used in hope of uncovering richer information about stressors these families face and strengths that sustain them. Interviews were conducted in the participants’ homes and lasted an average of two hours. In most cases, the wives and husbands were interviewed together. Both participants had the opportunity to respond to each question, but the opportunity to respond first would alternate with each question. While the approach of interviewing spouses together arguably has its costs, the benefits included spouses encouraging, reminding, and prompting each other to offer additional narratives, meanings, and explanations that seemed to ultimately yield richer data.

### *Analysis*

Following transcription, each interview was analyzed using a combination of analytic induction and grounded theory methodologies. Interviews were first analyzed in-depth separately for important and recurring themes and concepts within each couple’s interview. Later, across interview comparisons and content analyses were done. Consistent with grounded theory, recurring themes were identified (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This original list of recurring concepts and themes was narrowed through (a) eliminating less prevalent or less salient themes, and (b) combining closely related themes until the number of themes had been narrowed to a manageable number (less than 20). The interviews were then revisited to make certain that sufficient data

were available to support each theme. Following this step, it became apparent that some themes had been overstated (and were cut from the list) while other themes had substantial support across interviews. Next, in the findings section, the top eight themes are presented, two relating to *faith community*, three relating to *religious practices*, and three relating to *spiritual beliefs*. A richer and more extensive list of themes from data analysis is provided in Table 1.

## **FINDINGS**

Several interview questions were asked in an effort to shed light on possible reasons behind replicated results indicating correlations between religious involvement and marital quality, satisfaction, fidelity, and duration (Koenig et al., 2001). In connection with the focal questions of *how* and *why* religion influences or is influenced by marriage, recurring themes from the data are presented under the headings of the corresponding dimensions of religion.

### ***Faith Community and Marriage***

The two emergent themes relating to *religious community* were (a) the influence of clergy and (b) the mixed blessing of faith community service and involvement.

*The influence of clergy.* Laypersons of faith with whom I spoke, both formally and informally,<sup>3</sup> tended to refer to specific members of the clergy in polarized terms. Most references were positive (cf. Hill, Darling, & Raimondi, 2003), but there were some references to previous clergy as “crooks” or “rats” who had taken financial or immoral advantage of their position. Angie,<sup>4</sup> a former member of a Christian denomination who has since converted to Islam, reported:

When I was in the [X] church, I hit rock bottom when my parents divorced and then the minister was publicly humiliated because he was having affairs on his wife. That was my loss in trust, my trust was totally broken and my family life was shattered all at the same time [because my parents divorced too]. I had no idea where to go. . . . I wondered, how can [people like that minister] lead others? I realize that this also happens sometimes in Islam, but at that time I had hit rock bottom. I had God but I didn't have a faith.

TABLE 1. Whats, Whys, Costs, and Benefits of Religion for Marriages

**What aspects of religion were most often mentioned as meaningful to marriage?**

- Connection with clergy
- Faith community service and involvement throughout the week
- Saying prayers (personal, couple, and family)
- Having sacred rituals (i.e., Shabbat meal, family home evening, Ramadan)
- Studying sacred texts (The Holy Koran, The Torah, The New Testament, etc.)
- Shared beliefs in marital fidelity and commitment

**Why do they choose to be religiously involved?**

- It "feels good," it "fills a hunger"
- To promote family closeness, cohesion, and solidarity
- To offer a sense of personal, marital and/or family meaning
- To facilitate multi-generational connection
- To promote and build a sense of common history
- As a coping resource for stress in challenging times
- To promote separation from aspects of contemporary culture
- To facilitate conflict resolution
- To foster a sense of personal relationship and connection with God

**What costs were associated with religious involvement?**

- Negative associations with clergy or certain members of faith community
- Bigotry and prejudice from "outsiders"
- Tension with family members who do not share faith
- Money (participants donated an average of nearly 9% of their incomes)
- Time (required for personal, family, and faith community practices)
- Effort, preparation, and organization
- Recurring scheduling conflicts between outside entities (e.g., school, work, social activities, athletic or extracurricular participation) and sacred days
- Constant conflict between sociocultural norms and religious ideals

**What benefits did the married couples attribute to their religious involvement?**

- A structure and "rhythm to life"
- Better physical, mental, and/or spiritual health and quality of life
- Recovery from drug and/or alcohol addiction
- A "shared vision" in marriage
- A stronger marriage relationship
- A sense of comfort
- A sense of personal and marital meaning
- A sense of personal relationship and connection with God

(Adapted from Marks, L. D. (2004). Sacred practices in highly religious families: Christian, Jewish, Mormon, and Muslim perspectives. *Family Process*, 43, 217-231.)

For Angie, her experiences in her first faith community negatively influenced her view of marriage. Years later, she established a committed relationship with a Muslim man from Jordan named Omar. Angie, mentioned that it was Omar's family's dedication to Islam and to each other that initially drew her to that faith and to him. She explained:

I was mesmerized by how dedicated [Omar and his brothers] were to their Mom and Dad . . . and it wasn't just their family. The people who were true to Islam [were the same].

Angie later became Muslim and her life now reflects this same inseparability of family life and faith. When asked how much time she spent each week in faith-related activities and family activities she responded in a combined answer:

Every minute of every day we devote to faith. Our religion is our way of life. We fit our life into our religion, not [our] religion into our life.

Angie's story is of value in that her experience illustrates the capacity of a religious community leader to erode not only religious faith but also belief in the viability of marital and familial commitment as well. Additionally, as we will later see, her faith in Allah and marriage were both strengthened by a loving partner who offered an alternative to her negative previous experiences with both religious communities and family life.

James, a convert to the Mormon (Latter-day Saint, or LDS) faith who had struggled to overcome a drug addiction that had nearly cost him his marriage, stated:

[I could not have beaten my addictions without my] church. . . . I've been to rehabs, to AA and NA (Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous) meetings, I tried everything you can basically try to quit. Now I'm not saying that these places don't have good foundations because they do. But for me, I found something that was true to me and what I needed [in my church]. It took me a long, long, long road to find it. I mean [I had] to really soul search and find it. It took a long time, but I did. . . . The answer was the church that I go to now.

James further mentioned that the individual counseling he received from his bishop, a lay clergyman who was not paid for his efforts, was an important influence in helping him to progress, both personally and in his marriage.

Another participant whose marital life was impacted by a clergyman was Seth, a Jewish father of two, who fondly recalled a dynamic rabbi who had performed sacred rituals on his behalf early in life. This rabbi was kind enough to come “out of retirement” to perform Seth’s marriage to Sarah, who we will hear from later. Seth recalled:

We had a Jewish wedding. We brought a rabbi out of retirement, a fire-breathing rabbi from the old days, who we both knew intimately. He was the same rabbi who did my bris [circumcision] and my Bar Mitzvah.

Another note of gratitude to a clergyman, this time for the personal influence of his preaching, came from Rashaad, a member of an African Methodist church who became involved in faith during his late-thirties.

One Sunday I [finally] went to church with my wife. . . . I went to the service and the preacher man was preaching the word of God and I felt as though he was talking to me. Not that he was, but I felt that it was for me. . . . And it changed my life, right then and there. . . . My life hasn’t been the same since.

The power of this minister’s preaching in transforming Rashaad’s life is demonstrated by the fact that Rashaad, who would not attend church for years, has now served as the preacher’s right-hand man (“steward”) for two years, during which time his marriage has reportedly been both strengthened and challenged.

Thus we see that clergy can influence marriage. In Angie’s instance, the infidelity of a clergyman shook her faith in marriage and family, as well as her faith in God. However, her faith in both God and marriage were strengthened by her later contact with a Muslim man and the example of those within his faith community. For Seth, fondness and respect for a specific “fire-breathing rabbi from the old days” is evidenced by the request of Seth and his bride-to-be to perform their marriage although the rabbi was retired, a request that the rabbi kindly honored. For Rashaad, the influence of a preacher helped him to find a faith that reportedly bound him more closely to his wife Jackie. In short, whether

for good or ill, the influence of clergy was salient for many individuals and their view of and approach to marriage.

*The mixed blessing of faith community service and involvement.* Several of the parents interviewed stressed their desire to move beyond their own parents' approach to religion, which reportedly consisted primarily of "making appearances" at worship services. This desire included, in Joseph's words, going beyond "pew-warming" and serving the faith community. However, these efforts to be involved and to serve were reportedly both a blessing and a challenge to many of the individuals and their marriages.

Jackie, an African Methodist whose husband Rashaad began attending church with her just two years earlier, commented on the encouraging impact of their shared attendance.

It's different [now that] he understands *why* we're in this thing. He influences me. When I don't feel like going . . . and he wants to go, I'm thinking, I need to go too. It's different when both of you are there and both of you know what God can do, what He has done. We encourage each other.

However, Rashaad's newfound religious zeal involved a significant number of volunteer hours in addition to Sunday morning attendance and he addressed this struggle with church responsibilities. He explained:

[In connection with my church involvement] sometimes my wife lets me know, "Honey, I think you're overdoing it. I can just tell with your demeanor. You're just stressed out." Sometimes I've just had to break away [from volunteering at church] and say, I just need a break. . . . I mean, I'm burned out, overloaded, and sometimes you feel like people don't appreciate you . . . you know what I mean? . . . I'm just spread so thin I'm about ready to do a backflip right now. . . . You know what I mean? It's not like you're a bad person, sometimes you do just get overloaded.

Sarah, a Jewish mother with two young daughters who is highly involved in synagogue-based service, similarly commented:

There was a period of time where I was spending easily twenty hours a week in volunteer and religious activities, 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. I had to see the big picture and remember I was doing it [for] my kids and wanting to build a [close-knit Jewish] community for them in the future here in this area. But in the short term though, they . . . were unhappy because I had so much time in meetings and on the phone and on the computer and doing things like that, so I backed off.

Sarah's involvement also was mentioned as a challenge for her husband Seth. Even so, he explained why he has continued to support her in her efforts.

I don't like always having her out at nights, I like to have her home, but it's important to her. So it's, "Watch the kids tonight, I need to go to a [synagogue] board meeting." My only response is, "Okay." I'll never stop her from that, I will never get in the way of her faith. I appreciate it on another level—the world needs people like her. If it were up to people like me to keep [faith] going, the world would be in sad shape. I've teased her often that she's off to save the world. I tell her that when she's off to meetings and different events. She's passionate about it.

In sum, for Sarah, Seth, Rashaad, Jackie, and many other parents I interviewed, service to the faith community was a mixed blessing for wives, husbands, and marriages.

### ***Religious Practices and Marriage***

The major theme relating to *religious practices* and marriage were (a) the importance of prayer, (b) the connecting influence of family ritual, and (c) practicing marital fidelity. Each theme will be discussed and illustrated with data from the couples.

*The importance of prayer.* For Rahim and Alisha, prayer was one of the five pillars of Islam as well as a pillar of life. Another Muslim mother explained:

In Islam, we pray five times a day and the first prayer is before sunrise, so you have to set your alarm and you get up and you pray and [from that point] things in your day seem to go better.

A Muslim husband later attributed this strength and sense of life going “better” to a recurring connection with God [Allah] that is continually maintained through prayer. Prayer in Arabic is called *salat*. What does *salat* mean? It means connection, or your time to connect with God.

Khalid, another Muslim father, explained how this prayer can be familial as well:

[At prayer time, we say to] the kids, “Let’s quit the TV, and pray, and you go back to the TV later.” . . . [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.

A Mormon mother shared a similar prayer-related narrative:

[Family prayer] feels right. It feels good. It feels like this is what every family should be doing. I’m grateful to . . . be able to do that. If my family that I grew up with ever would have done that . . . it would have been a fond memory that I would have held, but we never did. [Our family now] should pray more, but when we kneel together and holds hands as a family, it brings a spirit of love into [our home and our marriage].

While the above comments are centered on either the individual or the family as a whole, the following narrative from Jessica, a non-denominational Christian mother, concisely captures a marriage-specific influence of prayer. Her pattern of turning to prayer during the storms of marriage was reflected in parents from other faiths as well:

[In our marriage] we have disagreements, we have things we don’t see the same . . . 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].

Jessica’s husband had this to say about prayer and his wife:

I see her get up every morning and take time to read scripture and pray and I just see that it's not separate from the rest of her day and that it influences the way she does [everything]; the way she interacts with me and the kids and everybody in the community. It's central, it's pervasive. . . . [It helps] you want to raise your kids well. [It helps] you want to love and support your wife.

In sum, prayer reportedly influenced marriage through pathways including providing a "connection with God," a sense of caring for spouse and children, bringing in "a spirit of love," and offering a valuable tool for conflict resolution. Yet prayer was not the only religious practice that reportedly influenced the couples' marriages. For some couples, other family rituals were vital as well.

*Shared family ritual.* Mormon families frequently referred to the meaning of family home evening in their lives. Aida, a Latina mother, discussed this ritual:

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].

A Korean Christian father, Oui, discussed a practice that was meaningful to him as well:

I love my wife [and we love] to worship together, to pray together, our family especially likes to [sing] together. I can play the guitar. . . . We really like to sing together with my son and my wife. Sometimes during the singing we get tears because God is full of grace and makes us feel that kind of feeling. I don't think I am a good [parent] compared to my wife but I make many efforts for my family. I make many efforts to keep my family happy . . . to keep growing in faith to[wards] God.

Among Muslim couples, the month-long fast and worship of Ramadan was a sacred family practice that was discussed frequently and enthusiastically:

Interviewer: Are there any faith practices that hold special meaning for you as a couple?

Dawud: One is Ramadan, because Ramadan is where families come together, eat together, fast together, wake up early in the morning to [break the fast together], . . . to support you for the day. . . . That's what we do as a family . . . together.

For the Jewish families in the study, sacred family rituals were especially central. For these couples, sacred ritual is not strictly the domain of the religious institution in the liturgical sense familiar to many in large mainline Christian faiths. Jewish ritual, by contrast, is often home and family based. Sarah explained how the Friday night ritual of welcoming in the Sabbath with the lighting of candles and the Sabbath meal have added a depth to her relationships with both her husband and her children.

[T]he Sabbath [ritual/meal] has a meaning of its own. . . . [A]fter [the meal], I always say a prayer of thanks for my children. . . . [The ritual] means that at least once during the week . . . I'm having a moment of thankfulness, where no matter what else is going on that may not be good, I'm very focused at that time on what I'm thankful for. . . . We don't do any work. It's a time given to relaxation and being together. 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.

Sarah's constant references to her husband and children—feeling close to them, praying with them, blessing them, being grateful for them—culminate in her expression that the Sabbath meal offers her something of great depth in the family context. Sarah's husband similarly summarized, "I don't know that the Sabbath meal is a religious experience for most people, but for me it's the *heart* of religion." Yet, the rituals that unite can also divide. One Jewish father lamented:

(Two of my brothers are) married persons out of the faith and I don't think they'll have much religion of any sort now. I don't think they'll have much Christianity or much Judaism. I see the family dynamics, the relationship between my parents and them. . . . I mean, my parents love them very much but it *hurt* my parents.

When we're all together, although we love them all and we get along with them all, we see the differences. When we are all sitting around at the holidays [which are loaded with rituals] they [the non-Jews] just don't get it.

Religion has also been bittersweet for Oui and Seongeun. The couple converted to Christianity as young adults in their native Korea but none of their family members have joined them in their newfound faith. Oui soberly explained:

We have a deep problem with religion with our families. So actually, that's the reason religion is not good sometimes. We can't [even] have our relatives praying for us. That's a terrible feeling . . . it has been a challenge.

Although Seongeun and Oui had found a sense of joy and meaning in their faith, their faith had also become a virtual line of demarcation between generations. As with the father whose brothers had married outside the Jewish faith, religion had become a source of "Di-vision" (two different visions) instead of a shared family vision (cf. Lavee & Katz, 2003). Although religious practices and marriage were often closely linked, this link could be a source of anguish when a family member married in a faith that differed from the faith of the parents.

*Practicing marital fidelity.* Angie, a Muslim convert and mother of two, spoke not only of religious practices and their meaning but also of detrimental practices that she felt her faith protected her and her husband from, namely extramarital affairs. Angie's parents<sup>5</sup> had divorced over infidelity issues years before, and she was especially sensitive to this issue. She explained:

My husband knows my worst fear before we got married [and before I was Muslim] was that I would divorce. I've seen a lot of men that when things get tough, they take off. [I was afraid] that my husband would leave or I would leave, an affair, whatever. . . . But now, I can sit here and look you in the eye [and tell you] I have no fear that my husband will have an affair. I know him. I know he lives his religion.

Later in the interview, Angie's husband Omar shared the following narrative that seems to illustrate why Angie displays such confidence in his fidelity:

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 degrading 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.

Omar had previously offered a detailed explanation of his spiritual belief that our misdeeds will be written in a personal book of life that will one day be opened before the world and that this belief keeps him in constant check. Note that Omar's faith is expressed not only in sacred practices like prayer but also in his *avoidance* of behaviors that are not congruent with his professed beliefs. It is to spiritual beliefs that we now turn.

### ***Marriage and Spiritual Beliefs***

Of the three dimensions of religion, spiritual beliefs were most frequently identified as directly and indirectly impacting marriage. Three key themes linking spiritual beliefs and marriage will be discussed in this section: (a) pro-marriage/anti-divorce beliefs, (b) homogamy of spiritual beliefs, and (c) faith in God as a marital support.

*Pro-marriage/anti-divorce beliefs.* Alberto, a Latino father of two, explained the impact his new spiritual beliefs had on him as a convert to the highly familistic Mormon faith when he was in his late-twenties.

Family has been one of the greatest blessings that I have experienced but when I was twenty-nine years old, I never thought of having a family, I only thought of myself. When I first learned of the church, it became apparent to me that God requires much more of people than their own self-interest, and recognizing this has brought me much more happiness and joy in my life than any other type of success ever could have. . . . My faith definitely influences the way I see myself as a human being. For me it's very easy to see this because I know perfectly how I was ten years ago before I became a member of my church. . . . My family (my parents and my brothers and sisters) always comment to me on the changes they see in my life. When I told them ten years ago that I was going to

get married according to the teachings of my [new] church, they just laughed because I didn't have a job or a girlfriend. Two years later, when I invited them all to my wedding they were all surprised. Three months after that, when I was appointed director of an office in the Mexican government, they were surprised again. Oh yes, there's been a great change in my life.

Alberto's narrative reflects the promotion of marriage and family by the Mormon faith, a focus also clear in Islam, Judaism, and Christianity (Agius & Chircop, 1998). While research indicates that faith involvement often influences marital and fertility rates (e.g., Stark & Finke, 2000), Alberto's narrative is unique in that it identifies marital and family attitudes before and after faith involvement, thereby marking the behavioral influence of those attitudinal changes. Indeed, from Alberto's perspective, his life and views of marriage were altered by his spiritual beliefs.

A clear and repeated theme by the parents was the importance of marriage and a strong aversion to divorce. As one Jewish father stated, "Divorce is just not in our subset of values." Jackie, an African Methodist mother, similarly cited:

"What God hath put together, let no man put asunder." I don't believe in divorce . . . God has engrained my marriage in me so deeply. . . . [Some] women might say, "I don't care if he [my husband] is mad or not." Or "I don't care if I spend all the money up." But in my mind I'm thinking [that] I've got to get myself together and give [God and my husband] the honor of what this relationship means. . . . We've been together so long, married sixteen [years], and it's not all been great but when they see Jackie, they want to know where Rashaad is.

Jackie's commitment to marriage and aversion to divorce are apparent, but these avowals may have a downside. When I visited Jackie's church, a long time member of the congregation explained to me that in her opinion there were several "bad" marriages in the congregation that should have been terminated years previously, but due to a congregational stigma on divorce, these marriages continued on for years and years.

Another perspective on marriage that was rooted in spiritual beliefs was presented by Patricia, a Mormon mother of six:

In our religion, if you are married in the temple, we believe that marriage is not just for this earth, it's for eternity, and when you think of your marriage for eternity that has a very definite impact on how you speak to each other, how you treat each other, how you raise your children, on everything you do. It's not something where you say, "If this doesn't work out, then we just won't do it anymore." This is a forever thing.

Jackie and Patricia's narratives reinforce the "very definite impact" that spiritual beliefs can have on marriage; in thoughts, words, and "everything you do." The gravity of marriage as a timeless covenant for Patricia is emphasized through her discussion of "marriage for eternity" and as "a forever thing" (cf. Dollahite, 2003). However, depending on the relational quality, a long-term or "forever" marriage might be either heaven or hell.

*Homogamy of religious beliefs.* The couples in this study repeatedly emphasized the importance of shared beliefs. A Jewish father said of his marriage, "Our values are always very, very close, which is why we're so close. . . . It has positively affected our marriage." Shana, a Latina Mormon mother of five, added some more depth to this idea.

Because we believe in the same things it makes [life] different. We feel that spiritual connection is [something that's] real and true. It's different than just a physical connection. . . . Those feelings pull you together, not only as husband and wife but as members [of the same church]. I guess it's just a spiritual thing.

Shana considered divorce at one point in her marriage, primarily due to her husband's substance abuse problems. James became involved in Shana's church and attributes that involvement as a key factor in "getting clean," as addressed previously. Shana's emphasis on "connection" and being pulled together with her husband by their shared faith illustrates a potentially positive influence shared religion can have on marriage.

Joseph, a non-denominational Christian father, captured the influence of shared spiritual beliefs in this way:

There's something that . . . when as a family your hearts are pointed together toward the same thing, and it's God, then parenting and economics and space and food and disagreements and hassles and joys and celebrations and all that other stuff . . . it

works different, it seems different, it feels different. . . . Our family is all oriented in the same way. Christ is king, He's the center, He's what it's all about. What if there was no dinner? What if there was no Christmas? It wouldn't be as fun and warm and fuzzy but . . . I don't know how to convey to you that . . . yes, our faith informs our relationships and everything about us.

A more cultural aspect of religious homogamy and its importance was captured by Seth, a Jewish father of two. He recalled:

I knew very early on that I wanted to marry Jewish. I never questioned that, I always knew. I always knew that it was the right path to take. I always believed, and still do, that the cultural upbringing of being Jewish is *so deep* that being married to someone who is not Jewish, they just wouldn't get it. They wouldn't laugh at the same jokes. They wouldn't enjoy the same foods I enjoy on the same levels, you know? [The holidays, the rituals] . . . I thought, who would want to go through life not being able to share that and understand that?

Seth lucidly outlined his desire to marry within his faith in quite non-religious terms. Faith beliefs, we are reminded, are not only spiritual but also serve as a family framework and as foundations for culture and subculture. Indeed, for those who are deeply connected to their faith, faith's influence may literally carry into jokes, foods, holidays, rituals, and—in a word—life. This may offer a partial explanation of lower divorce rates among same faith marriages (Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993; Marks, 2004).

*Faith in God as a marital support.* The most pervasive and salient spiritual belief reported by the couples in connection with marriage was that faith in God offered them marital support. A sizable minority of the couples explicitly stated that they did not believe their marriages would still be intact were it not for their faith in, and support from, the Divine.

*African Methodist father:* We both feel that a marriage is a bonding thing. As God says, "Whatever I join together let no man put asunder." 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. [I'd have said] "You don't want to do what I want to do. We just don't see eye to eye. I'm gone." But when you

believe in God . . . yes, the boat still gets to rockin' but the Bible says, "In me you can weather the storm."

*Arab American Muslim father:* [A]s a human, we get into fights, we get into disagreement on things. But, knowing that God is watching you, you cannot hurt your partner, or do something bad to her or He that is greater than you can hurt you at the same time. He can do something to you. So that's what kept me calm, Allah. . . . [M]y relationship [with Him] prevents me from doing such things. . . . Allah has helped me overcome it. Otherwise, I would say, if I don't have this relation[ship] [with] Allah. [Our marriage] would be failed a long time ago.

Many other couples made no explicit references to divorce but did address how their religious faith provided a "framework" or "strength" for their marriages.

*Jewish father:* Being Jewish within a family of Jews was really important and marrying Jewish was real important to me. I wanted to be married to someone who had as much in common with me as possible. . . . There's a certain framework for life and marriage in Judaism. . . . I look at the dynamics of a happy family, and [the faith] is just all part of it.

*Latino Catholic father:* Definitely our faith is a strength and this past year our faith has been a big strength to our [marriage] relationship too. What we've been through this past year would put a strain on any marriage but we have [been reminded] that our family is the most important thing to us and that we're in this together. . . . Our faith is all involved with that.

*African American Baptist mother:* [In our family] we believe that when we take any issue to God, that He says that He'll fix it for us, because we believe that He's a God who hears our prayers and who answers our prayers. As a family, we strongly believe in prayer, and so we encourage one another with prayer.

Thus we see that the couples viewed faith as a multi-faceted support in their marriages to "weather the storm[s]" and "to help you overcome" flaws. Additionally, faith reportedly provided a "framework," a "strength," and a strong belief during marital challenges.

In sum, spiritual beliefs reportedly impacted marriage through several channels. First, pro-marriage beliefs encouraged marriage while anti-divorce discouraged divorce. Second, shared religious beliefs helped provide similar worldviews and “visions” of family life. Third, a belief in God as a marital support was repeatedly mentioned as a strength and support without which many of these couples’ marriages (reportedly) would have failed.

### ***CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS***

In connection with clinical implications, I will address each of the three dimensions of religion (communities, practices, and beliefs) briefly but separately.

#### ***Faith Community***

The theme I addressed earlier involving the challenges and blessings of faith community involvement on marriage seemed to be symbolically captured by an Orthodox Jewish Sabbath service I attended. Men and women, husbands and wives, took their respective places on separate sides of a central partition. Following readings from the sacred Torah and an accompanying worship service, husbands and wives joined each other in the foyer. This format of worship is an apt similitude of the voluntary service many religious mothers and fathers render to their faith communities. Namely, for many couples in my study, volunteer service to the faith community served as a temporal partition between husbands and wives. This sacrifice sometimes seemed to pit religion against marriage and family in a struggle over limited time and energy. At the same time, however, these spouses shared a mutual commitment to their faith and tended to value the contribution the other was making to the faith community. Hence, such service was frequently viewed as a mutual and necessary sacrifice for which the couples believed their marriage and family were blessed. Even so, a key challenge for faith communities may be to avoid turning the temporary partition of volunteered time into a formidable wall between wives and husbands. Clinicians, especially pastoral counselors, may be beneficial in encouraging couples to avoid constructing such walls while remaining *secondarily* sensitive to faith community needs (see Doherty, 2001a).

### ***Religious Practices***

For the married couples in this study, religious practices (including prayer and sacred rituals) were mentioned as positive influences on marriage and family life (cf. Marks, 2004). The salience and influence of family rituals is certainly not limited to religious families, however. Previous research emphasizes the importance of deliberate, planned family rituals and practices in countering intra- and extra-familial demands and challenges that can diffuse and weaken families (Wolin & Bennett, 1984). Further, some observers offer guidance and direction both to therapists and a diverse array of families regarding how rituals can be beneficially designed, customized, and implemented (Imber-Black & Roberts, 1993; Imber-Black, Roberts, & Whiting, 2003; Doherty, 2001b).

### ***Spiritual Beliefs***

In connection with clinical family practice, Wright, Watson, and Bell (1996) have conceptualized beliefs as fundamental to understanding ourselves and others. For many individuals and families, spiritual beliefs are central to other beliefs they hold. Clinicians who are sensitive to beliefs (including spiritual beliefs) held by their clients will gain a more comprehensive understanding of the client and/or family. This idea is valid whether a client is atheistic, devout in a faith, or somewhere in between. For example, a client or family's spiritual beliefs regarding divorce, sexuality, death, and family relationships are of pragmatic significance and warrant the clinician's awareness, sensitivity, and consideration (Dollahite, Marks, & Olson, 2002). As Susan, a Catholic mother in our study, emphasized:

I think it is important to address faith [as a counselor], especially with someone who has brought it up. . . . To at least ask questions regarding how important faith is [to the individual or couple] and then to treat them sensitively. I think from my own experience, if I was going to a counselor, faith is so much a part of who I am that I couldn't separate faith and family, and when a counselor is treating a person, they should be treating the whole person and [be aware] of the issues they're dealing with.

It is important to note that it is not necessary that the therapist *share* the client's beliefs, only that s/he be sensitive to the client or family's beliefs.

## CONCLUSION

Despite their racial and religious diversity, the 76 wives and husbands in this study reported that their religious communities, practices, and beliefs were of central importance in maintaining, supporting, and stabilizing their marriages in the face of time, stress, and other challenges. While the size and nature of the sample does not allow generalization, these findings are of significance because they offer some explanations regarding the recurring correlations between religiosity and marital satisfaction, duration, and quality. Further, we see two critical ways in which religious involvement is sometimes a marital challenge for these participants. First, faith community involvement or service that separates couples for extended periods can add stress and strain to families. Second, intergenerational relationships can be damaged when one converts to a faith different than that held by the parents or through marrying “outside of the faith” that is central to one’s family of origin. Both the barriers and supports that religion can present to marriage need to be borne in mind.

This study contributes to the field not because it indicates that religious involvement correlates with marital stability and satisfaction—these data were already prevalent—but because the wives and husbands in this study present some central reasons *how* and *why* faith communities, religious practices, and spiritual beliefs present challenges and supports to marriage. While it is true that religion is not an important factor in many American marriages, religion *is* “the single most important influence in [life]” for “a substantial minority” of Americans (Miller & Thoresen, 2003, p. 25). Subsequently, for this substantial minority and for the married parents in this study, scholarly and clinical awareness of and sensitivity to the marriage and religion connection remains vitally important.

## NOTES

1. The participants reported financial contributions of a mean of over 8% of their incomes to their faith community and spent a median of 10 hours a week in voluntary religious activities.

2. Mormonism (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) is a Christian faith but it is addressed separately in this paper due to several 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).

3. I attended services for all of the world faiths represented in this paper and spoke with several members of each faith after services.

4. All participant names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

5. Angie's childhood pastor and his wife divorced due to the pastor's infidelity about the same time as her parents divorced. Although the two divorces were unrelated, they occurred at similar points in time which reportedly undermined Angie's faith in both religion and marriage for several years.

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