

# 11 “Don’t forget home”

## The importance of sacred ritual in families

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Humans, according to William James (1902), have a powerful innate desire to believe. A host of psychiatrists, psychologists, and family researchers have argued that there is no other group that infuses us with such a craving for belonging and acceptance as family (Pruett 2001). With these two fundamental human hungers posited, we turn to Marshall’s conclusion that: “The practice of ritual produces two primary outcomes – *Belief* and *Belonging*” (2002: 360, emphasis in original; see also Chapter 3, this volume). If the above experts are correct in asserting that we: long for something to believe in, long for something to belong to, and can satiate both of these craved, primary longings through sacred ritual practice – then family ritual (especially religious family ritual) seems a promising phenomena for social researchers to examine. The aim of this chapter is to provide a meaningful, “insiders’” perspective on sacred ritual in families.

### **A brief overview on religious ritual: where is family?**

The empirical foundation for social science interest in religion emerged from two different vantage points. Drawing liberally from biographies, autobiographies, and case studies, James’s (1902) psychological work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* reveals in vivid and highly individualized detail both “healthy” and “sick-souled” variations of religious practice and belief. Early sociological work by Durkheim (1912) focuses on the macro-level. Although this early complement of micro-level (James) and the macro-level (Durkheim) examinations buttressed the psychology and sociology of religion, the central ground rarely touched by psychologists or sociologists until the late 1970s was that of religion as a *family*-level force (Marks 2006).

The scholarly literature on religious rituals in the family has suffered from a similar lag. Work addressing religious ritual on the psychological level can be traced to Jung (1938) and others (see Chapter 6, this volume). Work on religious ritual as a macro-level force is also available, including recent studies by Marshall (2002), Stark and Finke (2000), and Collins’s (2005) conceptual piece on congregational-level aspects and influences of religious rituals. However, the central system that bridges the personal and sociological – the

1 family – is conspicuously absent in the most of the above discussions (for an  
 2 exception, see Bossard and Boll 1950).<sup>1</sup> In the sociological study of ritual, the  
 3 family and home are, perhaps, too small, too quaint, too far removed from  
 4 larger and more public institutional forms of religion and related ritual to  
 5 warrant serious attention. Similarly, in psychological studies of religious ritual  
 6 like Jung’s, the focus is almost exclusively on the individual (e.g., the “map of  
 7 the soul” (Stein 2003: 10)). Indeed, employing a family-level analysis adds  
 8 exponential complexity that makes it easier to leave familial issues alone.  
 9 Without disparaging the individual/psychological or institutional/sociological  
 10 approaches, we believe that familial-level study has much to offer the devel-  
 11 oping body of work on religious rituals. Indeed, religion is not only import-  
 12 ant but *most important* for a significant minority of US families (Dollahite *et al.*  
 13 2004) – and practice and ritual are often at the center of religion for these  
 14 families (Marks 2004). The topic of religion in family life has been historically  
 15 overlooked, but it has gathered greater attention since 2001 (Mahoney 2010)  
 16 – contributing a meso-level view that supplements and enriches extant psy-  
 17 chological and sociological perspectives. Little of this scholarship, however,  
 18 has focused on religious rituals.

19 The small body of research that examines religious, family-level ritual has  
 20 yielded some interesting findings – namely, that shared religious activities may  
 21 contribute to intimacy and commitment in marriage and that family religious  
 22 activities “also represent a potentially unique pathway to facilitate family  
 23 cohesion” (Mahoney *et al.* 2001: 590). Foundational work by Fiese and col-  
 24 leagues (1993) similarly links meaningful family rituals with marital satisfac-  
 25 tion, and Dudley and Kosinski (1990) report a similar connection between  
 26 family worship and marital satisfaction. Even so, several studies link family  
 27 satisfaction more strongly with *meaning* associated with the ritual than with  
 28 the ritual itself (Dollahite *et al.* 1998; Fiese and Tomcho 2001; Imber-Black  
 29 and Roberts 1993; Mahoney *et al.* 1999; Marks and Dollahite 2001). In sum,  
 30 we know little about the “whys” and “hows” and intervening processes that  
 31 are involved in the religion–family interface, particularly in connection with  
 32 ritual. This chapter seeks to illuminate some of the whys, hows, and processes  
 33 at work. In particular, we seek to answer the following inquiries:

- 34 1 What significant religious rituals are marital-, familial-, and/or home-  
 35 based?
- 36 2 What are the costs/challenges associated with religious, family-level  
 37 rituals?
- 38 3 Why and how are these rituals meaningful and influential to families?  
 39

### 40 **Method of inquiry**

41 In-depth, interview-based qualitative approaches to family research can “give  
 42 us windows” (Daly 1992: 4) and “lift the veils” (Blumer 1969: 32) to mean-  
 43 ings, processes, and relationships that are difficult to obtain through other  
 44  
 45

approaches (Gilgun *et al.* 1992). Our approach to responding to the above questions will be based on a qualitative study with a national sample of diverse religious families.

### **Sample**

Qualitative approaches do not typically share quantitative methods' concern with obtaining random and/or representative samples because generalizability is not a goal of most qualitative research (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Instead of seeking generalizable data, a primary concern in qualitative research is obtaining data with depth; therefore, sampling for qualitative research tends to be non-random, intentional, and purposive (Gilgun *et al.* 1992). Our purposive sample (N = 184 families, 445 individuals) is characterized by:

- 1 *a high level of religious commitment* (as reported by referring clergy and the participants themselves);
- 2 *racial and ethnic diversity* (50.5 percent of the families represent minority groups in the United States);
- 3 *a wide range of socioeconomic and educational levels*; and
- 4 *religious diversity* (Christian, Jewish, Latter-day Saint (LDS or Mormon), and Muslim traditions are all represented (see Dollahite and Marks (2009) for additional details)).

### **Procedures**

Twenty years ago, Thomas and Cornwall (1990: 990) challenged researchers who examine religion to use an approach that “address[es] questions about the meaning of the human condition ... an approach [that does not] ignore issues regarding the purpose of life, humankind’s relationship to the divine ... and other intimate and family experiences.” Our response to that challenge has included a narrative-based approach to interviewing families where mothers, fathers, and teenage children are asked to offer real-life narratives that illustrate and exemplify the religious, personal, and familial concepts that they share. Hardy (1968: 5) states: “We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative.” By extension, the balance of this chapter will be largely based on narratives and comments that support and illustrate four themes that offer us “insider perspectives” on religious rituals in families.

### **Themes and findings**

The four themes we address include:

- 1 the costs and challenges of religious, family-level rituals;
- 2 hearing the word together: family scripture study;

- 3 finding meaning in a hurry-up world: sacred family rituals; and  
 4 connecting with the Creator: the power of family prayer.

**Theme 1: the costs and challenges of religious, family-level rituals**

Wolin and Bennett (1984) emphasize that family rituals (religious or otherwise) require structure, effort, organization, and flexibility in families. Often, according to these researchers, family-level rituals present enough challenges that resolving the accompanying conflict is an integral element of success. Many contemporary families reportedly struggle to maintain even the most meaningful and sacred of practices due to the competing challenges of life from myriad outside forces (Doherty 2001; Imber-Black and Roberts 1993). There are also challenges from within the home, including the reluctance of children to participate. Jackie (all names are pseudonyms), an African-American Methodist mother of three daughters, reports:

You know what we try to do? And it kinda works. We get our kids to sit down at the table with us and we have a little Bible study and have some passages read around. And we just talk about their day, about something that's bothering them. Someone will read a scripture or explain something that they've heard in church ... so that they will have a base that they can build upon. But sometimes they'll say, "Mom, we don't want to do that right now."

Mitchell, a Baptist father of seven, similarly explains that although their weekly family night is important to him and to his wife, there is often resistance from their teenagers:

There's always the challenge of ... let's really make this relevant and helping [our children] see the usefulness. Sometimes I think [the resistance is] because of the pressures of their schedule, they've got homework, they've got this or that. (Sometimes) we need ... to say, "Okay, listen ... we can spend time complaining about this or we can actually have some meaningful time." And ... I think for the most part, when we do have those times, they do appreciate it. [But there are] challenges.

Mitchell's 18-year-old son, Byron, then interjected, "[We] might not always enter into it with the most willing attitude, but it's definitely a blessing at the end."

Reports such as Jackie and Mitchell's remind us that family rituals are, often, rituals in overcoming resistance. The balance can be a delicate one – if there is too little structure and commitment then the ritual is likely to die. Conversely, Lee *et al.* (1997) find that while some religious family practices seem to facilitate marriage and family relations, "compulsory" family worship can sometimes be counter-productive. Several parents addressed the tension

between actively engaging versus forcing children in connection with family-level rituals. Rachel, a Jewish mother of three (including two teenagers), explains:

We do the same rituals for our holidays and all our Sabbath activities and you know, a lot of times we have to nag the kids and pull them into things, but if we *don't* do something or if something is missed or if we say, "We are not going to do Shabbat," they say [with excited animation], "What do you mean we're not doing it!?" ... They'll get mad that we don't do [Shabbat]. They're upset because life is not the way it usually is. They get upset if we don't hallow [the Sabbath]. It's very interesting. Sometimes they act like we are *annoying* them by dragging them through the ritual but if we don't have it there for them they get upset by it. ... The religion provides a lot of strength and comfort and structure.

Patricia, an LDS mother of six (with just one child still at home) says:

Family home evening, is a family get-together on Monday night when we have fun and play together, [and pray together], and teach the children. When our children were very young, we used to think, "Why are we doing this? This is crazy, they are not listening to a word." And now, as adults, they will come back and say, "Family home evening was so wonderful!" [Laughter.] You don't realize the impact a lot of things have when you are doing them. ... We have also done a lot of summer vacations and family reunions. They used to fight us tooth and toenail every summer, and now the one who fought us the hardest will do anything to be there. It's payday, you just have to hang in there.

One common theme between Rachel and Patricia's reflections is the effort required. Note the language of these two mothers (e.g., Rachel's statements that "we have to nag them or pull them" and "they act like we are *annoying* them by dragging them through the ritual," and Patricia's reference that her children will "fight us tooth and toenail"). A second common theme is the (often less evident) meaning of the familial religious practice to the children. In Rachel's case, this does not become apparent until she suggests not carrying through with Shabbat observance (cf. Marks 2004). In Patricia's case, the power of the family home evening ritual does not come to her attention until literally years later. In connection with both the effort required and invested in ritual, as well as the subsequent outcome, we note Marshall's (2002: 371) theoretical statement that "*The strength of Belief/Belonging created by a ritual increases with the Effortfulness its practice entails*" (emphasis in original). From this position, challenges to ritual, if met by the necessary effort to overcome them, serve to magnify a ritual's power.

Continuing on this note, in addition to internal resistance to family religious practices, external conflicts reportedly present challenges as well,

1 particularly for Jewish and Muslim families whose holy days do not corres-  
 2 pond with those of the dominant culture. Debra, a Jewish mother with teen-  
 3 agers, explains:

4  
 5 Because our faith is not the faith of the nation, we have conflicts with  
 6 the general community. We have conflicts for both us [my husband and  
 7 I, as well as] our kids, in terms of both work and school commitments –  
 8 with school dances, sports, or performances. I could go on and on. There  
 9 is a lot of conflict in terms of when you need to observe [the Sabbath and  
 10 other holy days] when other things are going on... It creates problems  
 11 for all of us in the family. It comes up every week actually, Friday  
 12 evening, Saturday morning, Saturday afternoon. It's hard when you grow  
 13 up in a community where they have school dances on Friday nights ...  
 14 it's just endless. There's constant conflict.  
 15

16 Debra repeatedly invokes the word “conflict,” conveying the constant  
 17 Culture *vs.* Faith/Family battle she faces as an observant Jewish mother.  
 18 Indeed, there are challenges, costs, and conflicts inherent in belief-behavior  
 19 congruence for each of these families, yet this racially and religiously disparate  
 20 sample of parents reflect some similarities regarding why their faith-based  
 21 family rituals and practices are worth the costs involved (cf. Marks 2004).  
 22

### 23 ***Theme 2: studying the sacred word together: family scripture study***

24 For several of the families we interviewed, variations of studying or reviewing  
 25 scripture or sacred text together is a meaningful religious ritual. Natalie, 14  
 26 years old, reports:  
 27

28 [Mom and Dad] know the scriptures really well, which helps them in  
 29 their lives. And then we have scripture study every morning so ... they  
 30 help us [and] ... are teaching us that too. The gospel plays a huge role in  
 31 their lives, which therefore plays a huge role in my life, 'cause they teach  
 32 it to us.  
 33

34  
 35 Trey and Rischelle's family also hold daily family scripture study but offer a  
 36 less idyllic report on their teenager, Cyndi. Trey explains:  
 37

38 Cyndi complains that [our study] lessons are boring sometimes ... and I'll  
 39 admit a lot of them *are* boring. But every once in a while it just clicks.  
 40 You know, everybody's interested and everybody has questions and it's a  
 41 real feeling of oneness as a family. It just kind of all comes together...  
 42 Those are the times that I think, you kind of have to live through all the  
 43 boring stuff, and keep doing it, even though it is boring, and then occa-  
 44 sionally [when] it really clicks and there's a really good one ... those are  
 45 the ones that I remember as being really special.

In some families, the most salient examples of family scripture study are not daily but, rather, are connected to annual holy days. For many of the Jewish families we interviewed the most poignant scriptural recitation and reading take place as part of sacred rituals such as the Passover Seder, where God's sparing of the children of Israel and their liberation from slavery is revisited in narrative and with several symbols. One mother, Rachel, relates: "A Seder is telling a story.... You tell the story and you remember.... Mostly, [in] our family we take turns reading through the *Hagaddah*, [then] we say [scripture-based] blessings together."

For Jasmine, an African-American Methodist teen, and her family, Christmas sparks a family scripture study with elements that are similar to those reported by Rachel. Jasmine says:

[There is a] ritualistic nature of the things that kind of bring us together. Like every Christmas, before I get to open any presents, we always read the Christmas story; and it's not because we don't know the Christmas story. We can all recite it from memory ... but [what's important is] just being together and reliving that story every year. And it's not even necessarily [just] the religious aspect of it. I think it's just because we're all together ... and we can appreciate each other in that way.

Note that Rachel and Jasmine emphasize at least three shared central elements:

- 1 *story* (both mention it multiple times);
- 2 *remembering* ("You tell the story and you remember," and "We can all recite it from memory ... we [are] reliving that story every year"); and
- 3 *unity* ("we take turns reading ... then we say blessings *together*," and "[it] brings us *together* ... [what's important is] just being together ... we can appreciate *each other*").

With these elements noted, we revisit Hardy's (1968: 5) statement that we "remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe ... and love by narrative." Indeed, for Rachel, Jasmine, and many other families – sacred narrative, scripture, and ritual seems to promote, maintain, and enhance both belief and belonging.

While annual remembrances such as Seder and Christmas were the scripture-infused rituals that were most salient to some, many other families talked of less dramatic but more frequent scripture study rituals – in many cases, these were daily. One of the more striking examples is offered by a Jehovah's Witness family with two children.

JENNIFER (MOTHER): When the kids were younger ... our family study was reading through the Bible. Each kid read out loud through the entire Bible. It took about three years.... We used all different Bible translations.

1 MARK (FATHER): And ... we discussed it.

2 JENNIFER: And then when Nick did it, then Erica started doing it... And  
3 we did it as a whole family. So the whole family, we have listened [to]  
4 both of our kids read the Bible out loud from beginning to end.  
5

6 An Arab-American Muslim mother named Asalah similarly explains her fami-  
7 ly's approach to studying sacred texts together:  
8

9 [After] saying prayers together as an entire family, most evenings ... we  
10 read from the religious books [*The Koran* and *Hadith* (teachings of  
11 Mohammed)] and talk about Islam and the values, which in your daily  
12 life, you can sometimes forget. [It serves as] a reminder to everyone again  
13 [and it] is done as a family.  
14

15 Elise, an LDS mother, reflected on the value of daily scripture study in her  
16 family:  
17

18 One of the most important [sacred practices] for me is [reading] scripture  
19 verses.... Each night we gather together and we study from the scrip-  
20 tures, and each child who can read [will] take turns reading verses from  
21 the scriptures and when the kids don't understand something they'll stop  
22 us ... and it's a wonderful opportunity for us every day to teach them a  
23 little bit more, and to find out what they know. We never cease to be  
24 surprised at how much they are already picking up and how much they  
25 understand. And doing that every day is something that I hope will con-  
26 tinue to instill ... what we believe.  
27

28 As we revisit the common elements from the annual rituals mentioned previ-  
29 ously, we note that although the powerful narrative element of the Seder or  
30 Christmas celebration may be difficult to capture on a daily basis, the two  
31 earlier identified elements of *remembering* and *unity* are clearly integral in these  
32 daily scripture-based rituals. In connection with *remembering*, Asalah says of  
33 their family's Koran study, "In your daily life, you can sometimes forget. [It  
34 serves as] a reminder". In connection with *unity*, participants report, "We did  
35 it as a whole family," "[It] is done as a family," and "Each night we gather  
36 together." We note that in the narratives from the three different families, the  
37 word *we* appears nine times, while *I* appears only once. *This is significant*  
38 *because the singular first-person is typical in our interviews, but this is not the case in*  
39 *parents' discussion of family rituals.* Our participants' discussions of family rituals  
40 seem to convey and invite unity, we-ness, and relationship. Perhaps this is, in  
41 part, what Collins is referring to when he states, "Ritual is inherently moral"  
42 (2005: 335).

43 As we conclude our discussion of families and the sacred word, we note  
44 that in families where scripture study is important, an underlying theme is  
45 that what is taking place is, in some ways, more than the reading of a sacred



text. It is a time for motivation, discussion, learning, and worship; but perhaps above all, it is a time for hearing the sacred word *together*. Belief and Belonging are infused and interconnected.

### ***Theme 3: finding meaning in a hurry-up world: sacred family rituals***

Although scripture study is important to some families, other families discuss other rituals that hold sacred meaning for them. The focus, however, seems to remain upon a unifying and coming together of the family that centers on faith. A Muslim father, Ibrahim, explains:

In addition to prayer and scripture ... we cherish the month [long fast] of Ramadan, [be]cause we do so many things together as a family. We wake up in the middle of the night. We sit together, we eat together, we pray together.... It's a very, very good experience for us.... The month of Ramadan has been prescribed to us where every Muslim is supposed to ... fast from dawn to sunset. So what we do is we get up early – very early in the morning – [and] we have a meal together, and then after the meal, we read Qur'an, our scripture. And after we do that, it's time for prayer. We pray together.... [I]n the evening during breaking of the fast, again, the same thing happens as during the morning. We all come together as a family, and we eat together and we thank God together, we pray together, [then] we break the fast.... So the whole month of Ramadan is a ... unique experience. We do a lot less of the worldly things and a lot more of godly things than we normally do.... And especially when you do those kinds of things together every day ... it tends to bring people together and it strengthens our beliefs and family.

Once again, we see a familial fusion of Belief and Belonging. For Ibrahim and his family the month of Ramadan means “a lot less of the worldly things and a lot more of the godly things” – a month-long resistance to the often frenetic pace of modern life. One central implicit theme in Elkind's (2007) *The Hurried Child* is that *the best things in life are slow*. Several of the families we interviewed, including Ibrahim's, view sacred ritual as a cadence mechanism that provides a “rhythm to life” and that helps to “slow things down when things get too crazy.” Several Jewish families explain how the Jewish ritual of welcoming in the Sabbath/Shabbas (on Friday evening) with the lighting of the candles and the Sabbath meal adds depth to their family relationships. A 17-year-old daughter, Hannah, explains:

[Shabbas] means that I don't have to worry about the usual things. The rest of the week [is a] totally different time. We have Shabbas, and that's Shabbas – [it is] different. We don't have to worry about the rest of the world. The rest of the world goes on, but we're here with our family and our religion. That's just ... it's our time.

1 Note that although Hannah is in the presumed “me-first” years of teenage  
 2 life, her description of the familial Shabbas ritual invokes *we* three times, *our*  
 3 three times, and *I* only once. We next hear from Sarah, a Jewish mother in a  
 4 different family in a different region of the country, whose narrative seems to  
 5 resonate with Hannah’s on many levels. Sarah shares:  
 6

7 When we take the time out, when we light the candles Friday night,  
 8 that’s a time that I feel really close to (my children)... It’s a chance for  
 9 everyone to sit down and to breathe and to think about these things  
 10 before we get to eating. I think that is healthy for one thing, and it’s  
 11 nice that everyone isn’t running off in their own direction. We all sit  
 12 down and calm down and say the blessing and then start *together*. There’s  
 13 a sense of ritual that I think the kids love and we still love as adults;  
 14 things that we do that have been done for generations and genera-  
 15 tions... It is a chance to breathe, to relax. I think, okay, we’ve had a  
 16 busy week and here’s our time to be *together* and we always take a deep  
 17 breath before we do this and let all the thoughts, craziness, and worries,  
 18 and everything slip away and we say the blessing. And after we say the  
 19 blessing ... it’s welcoming in the Sabbath which has a meaning of its  
 20 own. And then afterwards, I always say a prayer of thanks for my chil-  
 21 dren... We don’t do any work. It’s a time given to relaxation and  
 22 being together. When we sit across the table from each other, my  
 23 husband and I, and the Sabbath candles are lit, and I see the kids, there  
 24 is something I get from that that is *so deep*. It’s just a feeling that [all is  
 25 right in the world] ... it doesn’t matter what else is going on. Right in  
 26 that circle ... it’s awe-inspiring.  
 27

28 Daniel, Sarah’s husband, summarizes, “I don’t know that the Sabbath meal is  
 29 a religious experience for most people, but for me it’s the *heart* of religion.”  
 30 Note that for Daniel and Sarah, the heart of their religion beats strongest not  
 31 in the synagogue, but around their family dinner table – which according to  
 32 Jewish tradition represents a sacred altar, a place of communion between God  
 33 and His children (and, perhaps, *among* His children as well).

34 As we review Ibrahim’s discussion of his family at Ramadan in connection  
 35 with Hannah and Sarah’s narratives of the familial Shabbas meal, we note that  
 36 the word *we* is used 35 times and *together* is used 15 times – while *I* is invoked  
 37 just eight times, perhaps reflecting the unity and belonging that are promoted  
 38 (or at least idealized) by these sacred familial rituals.

39 Aida, a Latina Mormon mother of two, similarly mentions a family ritual  
 40 of faith that has some interesting similarities to Sarah and Daniel’s Sabbath  
 41 meal.  
 42

43 Family home evening is a meeting we have; the whole family, parents  
 44 and the children. We have the meeting *every* week [on Monday night].  
 45 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 will retell the lesson in her words. This has had a tremendous impact on her [and her younger sister].

We note elsewhere that:

there are common elements in Sarah's welcoming of Shabbas and Aida's family home evening. First, the time is consistent (Friday or Monday evening, respectively). Second, the event is not haphazard. In fact, the time is consecrated (made sacred or set apart), as formally designated in Judaism by the lighting of the Sabbath candles, or with hymn singing and prayer for Aida's family. Third, the rituals take place even when life is "crazy," for ... the hectic and harried times are when sacred ritual is *most* needed to restore a sense of structure, order, and reverence to chaotic life. A fourth commonality is that, to the degree possible, all family members are involved. Fifth, a variety of practices are integrated into a single family ritual, including prayer, singing of sacred songs, spiritual teaching, and discussion.

(Marks 2004: 225)

For the families of Ibrahim, Hannah, Sarah, and Aida, it is as if several religious elements are combined week after week to communicate, exemplify, and reinforce the intersection of faith and family as the *axis mundi* or central meaning of life (Eliade 1959).

#### ***Theme 4: connecting with the Creator – the power of family prayer***

Family scripture study (Theme 2) and sacred family rituals (Theme 3) like those just mentioned are central to many families we interviewed. Even so, neither scripture study nor sacred ritual compares with family prayer in terms of reported prevalence or importance. For many of the families we interviewed, prayer is a time to feel a closeness to God, as well as a connection with each other. Khalid, a Muslim father, used these words to describe evening prayer with his children:

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.

Bobby, a Jehovah's Witness teen, talks about a similar effort he felt his father had made to pray daily with him and his sisters:

1 It tends to be difficult to get us together [but] prayer has always been  
 2 something that's central. [I] mean, we'll be here before school in the  
 3 morning, before my sisters hop on the bus. . . . Dad still gets up early and  
 4 prays with them, and prays with me, before I go off [to school].  
 5

6 An Episcopalian teen, Ben, similarly recalls:  
 7

8 When I was younger . . . we used to pray before I went to bed. And I  
 9 always liked that, not necessarily because we were praying, but [because  
 10 it was] just time when I was with my Mom and with my Dad, just  
 11 talking and being thankful.  
 12

13 In addition to morning (Bobby) and evening (Khalid, Ben), family dinner  
 14 time is another sacred prayer time for many of the families we interviewed.  
 15 One mother, Catherine, reports, "We pray together at meals, before the  
 16 meals . . . and those are definitely rituals that give us structure." A Methodist  
 17 father, Patrick, similarly observes:  
 18

19 [One meaningful practice for our family is] grace before meals, and  
 20 trying to have a moment in every day where we gather together as a  
 21 family and start it with a blessing. It's really important to us. We have  
 22 very busy children, and we're very busy. . . . So it is really a priority to us  
 23 to keep that family time there and to start that family time with a  
 24 blessing.  
 25

26 One Catholic family, who also discussed "spontaneous" or conversational  
 27 prayers, believe strongly in the structure offered by formalized prayers as well  
 28 and report their ritual of beginning their family's day with formal prayer  
 29 together. They note:  
 30

31 ELISABETH: Morning prayer [is important to our family] . . .

32 JASON: That's the tradition. . . . [W]e have formalized prayers that we've  
 33 taught the kids; so they know them. It's part of their [day, part of their  
 34 life], they can breathe them now. That's kind of how prayer(s) [should  
 35 be]. . . . You can *breathe* them.  
 36

37 Angela, another Catholic mother, relates a dinner prayer ritual her family  
 38 follows:  
 39

40 A couple years ago I started to take the Advent prayer and fold it up and  
 41 put it under somebody's plate, [someone] different all the time. And it  
 42 was one of those traditions I didn't remember the next year, but the kids  
 43 [did]. And now, even our youngest . . . around Thanksgiving time, she  
 44 starts looking under plates before supper. And sometimes I forget how  
 45 those very simple, but important things . . . connect faith and family.

Like Angela, many of the Muslim families we interviewed seem to take delight in seeing the practice of prayer and related ritual passed on to their children. A Muslim, Aisha, notes:

The baby even, she'll try to come in ... and she'll try to put the prayer mats down. ... It's a wonderful thing to see that this is something that they want, that you don't force them. ... That's really the beauty of Islam.

Although family prayer was often meaningful for the families we interviewed, these narratives do not capture the effort and hassle frequently involved (as we overviewed in Theme 1). Some made references to resistance (e.g., "dragging kids," "pulling teeth") and failure to have anything resembling a spiritual experience (e.g., "just going through the motions"). The question arises, "Why is it worth it?" Responses to this question vary. For one Jewish father, Seth, a key answer to this question is that prayer is a legacy that linked the family not only with God and each other, but also with their late grandfather, who inspired their family prayers through his faithful example. Seth explains:

I looked at my grandfather and he was religious, I mean *very* religious. ... He was one of the few people where I really did see a passion and a love for his God and his religion. When he prayed, you could see him well up with emotion, it really meant something to him. It broke through to a whole other level. ... Now we say prayers before dinner every night and that was actually a decision we made when my grandfather died. One of the memories I had of him was that he wouldn't sit down to a meal without saying a blessing, "Thanks for this bread." When he died, we decided, "Let's do that before each meal, that way we'll remember him for eternity" – and it really stuck. We started doing it right away and we have been doing it every day since his passing.

In Seth's narrative, the sacred religious practice of family prayer and blessing before meals is powerfully and inextricably connected to Seth's grandfather and his faithful and congruent example. Consistent with previous work, this ritual seems to promote "relating, changing, healing, believing, and celebrating" for both the adults and children in Seth's family (Imber-Black and Roberts 1993: 28). It is noteworthy that Seth (and many other parents we interviewed) had difficulty discussing religious rituals independent of family because the two had been deliberately and tightly interwoven across time.

Omar, an Arab-American Muslim father, explains, "Prayer in Arabic is called *salat*. ... [*Salat*] means connection, it is your time to connect with God." For many of the families, prayer is a time to feel connected to each other as well. As expressed by Shana, an LDS mother of five:

1 [Family prayer] feels right. It feels good. It feels like this is what every  
 2 family should be doing. I'm grateful to ... be able to do that. If my  
 3 family that I grew up with ever would have done that ... it would have  
 4 been a fond memory that I would have held, but we never did. [Our  
 5 family now] should pray more, but when we kneel together and holds  
 6 hands as a family, it brings a spirit of love into [our home] and makes  
 7 the children feel right and lets them know that this is what is right and  
 8 that this is what they need to do with their families and I'm sure they'll  
 9 remember it.

10  
 11 For LDS fathers like Shana's husband James, family prayer is not only a tool  
 12 or a ritual, it is a commandment. A verse from LDS scripture reads, "Pray in  
 13 your families unto the Father, always in my name, that your wives and your  
 14 children may be blessed" (3 Nephi 18:21). Tina, an LDS mother, offers an  
 15 additional reason for prayer in her family:

16  
 17 [We want] to make sure [Heavenly Father] is a part of what we do all the  
 18 time.... He's real, He's always there for you. He's part of who you are as  
 19 a family ... we say family prayer and say, "Thanks for the opportunities  
 20 we've had, please help us to grow together, please help us." ... I mean I  
 21 just said family prayer tonight and ... it's just, I want [God] to be there as  
 22 a partner with us, and our family, and our [marriage] relationship.

23  
 24 In scope, family prayer seemed to influence persons ranging from Muslim  
 25 toddlers to a Jewish grandfather. In purpose, family prayer was a way to  
 26 express thanks, establish sacred traditions, connect with one's God and other  
 27 family members, and invite God to bless and be "part of who you are as a  
 28 family." It may be that family prayer is the family ritual par excellence.

## 30 Conclusions

31  
 32 Many of the chapters in this volume are theoretical. This chapter is familial  
 33 and prosaic. Our hope, however, is that it will also be pragmatic without  
 34 being prescriptive. At least for some, including many of the 184 families we  
 35 interviewed, sacred family ritual is a meaning-rich phenomenon in a post-  
 36 modern world struggling with what has been critically dubbed "the existen-  
 37 tial vacuum" (Frankl 1984: 128). Hoffmann (forthcoming: 12) similarly posits  
 38 that a "useful way to view rituals is to study their role in *boundary work* – the  
 39 conceptual or symbolic demarcation of social space." We would add that *religi-*  
 40 *ous* ritual can also create or demarcate a sacred space – not only in churches,  
 41 synagogues, mosques, and temples, but within homes and inside (often fren-  
 42 etic) schedules. Hoffmann (forthcoming: 12) continues by indicating that  
 43 rituals can perform boundary work by creating "a tendency to see some  
 44 people as members of one's group." Phrased differently, family ritual may  
 45 help move individuals from "me" to "we." As reported by both teens and

parents in our study, sacred family rituals can also move those involved toward the divine and the transcendent – and, perhaps, away from the crippling effects of anomie, meaninglessness, and existential vacuum that have concerned several giants of social science over the past century.

It is not our aim to present sacred family ritual as a panacea, but to offer greater insight regarding what religious rituals our diverse sample reportedly benefited from, as well as to highlight how and why these family rituals were meaningful to the participant families. Table 11.1 offers an overview of significant elements we discovered in addition to the four central themes addressed in the text of this chapter. Our data offer considerable support for Marshall’s (2002, Chapter 3, this volume) position that two primary outcomes of ritual are Belief and Belonging. The depth and richness of the data, however, allow us to identify other reported benefits or outcomes as well, including:

- 1 relaxation, the ability “to breathe,”
- 2 structure and “rhythm to life,”
- 3 better physical, mental, and/or spiritual health and quality of life,
- 4 improved (direct and indirect) parent–child communication,
- 5 stronger marriage relationship,
- 6 a sense of comfort/meaning, and
- 7 a personal relationship and connection with God.

Although many of the above outcomes relate to Belief, Belonging, or both, some of these outcomes (relaxation, “breathing,” structure, rhythm, health, comfort, meaning) seem to form a somewhat separate category that centers around *Quality of Life* – and, perhaps, Elkind’s (2007) reminder that the best and more meaningful things in life are often slow. Future research should explore this addition to Marshall’s (2002) work.

With this addition and extension to Marshall’s (2002) work offered, the most salient processes and purposes in our data include *hearing the word together [through] family scripture study* (Theme 2), *finding meaning in a hurry-up world [through] sacred family rituals* (Theme 3), and *connecting with the Creator [through] family prayer* (Theme 4). Even so, the associated challenges and costs (Theme 1) that come from both inside and outside the family are often significant and frustrating. In acknowledging the internal and external challenges and conflicts associated with consistent sacred family ritual, we restate Marshall’s (2002: 371) proposition that: “*The strength of Belief/Belonging created by a ritual increases with the Effortfulness its practice entails.*” Perhaps it is not only the sacred source but the social and internal resistance that imbue family rituals with the meaning and power necessary to fill two of our most poignant human needs and hopes: to believe and to belong.

Table 11.1 The whats, whys, and benefits of religious rituals for families (adapted from Marks 2004)

**What do they do?** (What religious rituals were most often mentioned, respectively?):

- Prayer (personal, couple, and family)
- Sacred Ritual (i.e., Shabbat meal, Family Home Evening, Ramadan)
- Study of Sacred Texts (The Holy Koran, The Torah, The New Testament, etc.)
- Singing of Sacred Music

**Why do they do it?** (What purposes, motives, and meanings were connected to these rituals?):

- To transmit religious beliefs to the rising generation
- To teach the rising generation a moral way of living
- To promote family closeness, cohesion, and solidarity
- For a sense of personal and/or family meaning
- For a sense of multi-generational connection
- To promote and build a sense of common history
- As a coping resource for stress or in challenging times
- To provide an example for children
- To promote separation from contemporary culture without segregation
- Because children “push” or “pull” you into it
- To facilitate conflict resolution
- To promote empathy, patience, gratitude, and discipline (i.e., through fasting)
- To influence change in situations outside the realm of personal influence
- To foster a sense of personal relationship and connection with God

**What are some costs associated with religious rituals?**

- Bigotry and prejudice and lack of understanding from outsiders
- Money (including direct costs and opportunity costs (i.e., missed work))
- Time
- Effort, preparation, and organization
- Recurring scheduling conflicts between outside entities (e.g., school, work, social activities, athletic or extra-curricular participation) and sacred days
- Constant conflict between sociocultural norms and religious ideals
- Internal resistance from and conflict with children

**What benefits did parents attribute to religious rituals?**

- Relaxation, the ability “to breathe”
- A structure and “rhythm to life”
- Better physical, mental, and/or spiritual health and quality of life
- Improved (direct and indirect) parent– child communication
- Stronger marriage relationship
- A sense of comfort
- A personal relationship and connection with God

## Note

- 1 Vesna Wallace (Chapter 10, this volume) offers another type of exception to the general inattention to family rituals by describing how rituals to protect livestock are often conducted in households.



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