How the Perception of God as a Transcendent Moral Authority Influences Marital Connection Among American Christians

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Dynamics that link individuals' perceptions of God as a transcendent moral authority and marital connection were analyzed in depth using qualitative data from a sample of 48 Christian spouses from California and New England. Thirty-six individuals expressed their perception of God as a transcendent moral authority, and compared to 12 who did not, they conveyed three distinctive religious-marital dynamics. These were all processes to promote marital unity that engaged God, namely: (1) spouses modified their individual behavior in marriage with reference to their God model, (2) they shared as a couple the goal to obey God together, and (3) they perceived that God strengthened their marital bond. Further, there were underlying common factors to these three dynamics: (a) the spouses' perception of God as a being who has an integrated personality of divine attributes—including demand for loyalty to God and interpersonal care, (b) their emulation of God, as well as having a relationship with God, in the form of obedience and receiving grace, and (c) their marriage being centered in God in a way that the relationship is characterized by their dealings with God. This structure was different from that of the individuals who did not view God as a transcendent moral authority. Specifically, these spouses focused more on individual autonomy, communication, or religion itself in regard to marriage; but not on God who has personality and authority. Thus introducing one unique vertical dimension, perceiving God as transcendent moral authority, to marriage appears to be associated with distinctive dynamics and a socio-psychological structure within the marriage relationship.

In recent years, there have been calls for studies that link religion and family life together while also dealing with substantive aspects of religiousness, such as doctrinal beliefs, in order to provide detailed explanations for the various psychological and relational processes behind the link (Mahoney, Pargament, Swank, & Tarakeshwar, 2001; Mahoney, 2010). There are some recent studies that have begun to address the need to better understand religion's dynamic functions in family relationships (e.g., Murray-Swank, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2006). Yet, a significant knowledge gap still remains in this area. For example, explaining the effects of religion on marriage is called for by the studies of transformative processes in marriage (Fincham, Stanley, & Beach, 2007). Transformative processes in marriage are processes such as commitment, sacrifice, and forgiveness, which establish and maintain couple relationships through the inevitable ups and downs of married life. Fincham et al. (2007) identify religion

as a potential "deep meaning structure" (p. 281) that has a potential to induce iterative transformative processes in marriage. They assert that even though understanding the roles of religion conducive to these self-regulatory processes is crucial, "sufficient depth to fully understand the implications for marital transformation" (p. 281) has not been probed.

The dynamic connections between religion and marriage involve foundational worldviews because both deal with the groundwork for life, most likely in an intermingled way. Qualitative analysis of data on the interface of religion and marriage is a relevant approach to assist with unraveling this aspect of the question. One potentially effective focus of analyzing the substantive and structurally influential aspects of couples' religious orientations is on the presence, or lack thereof, of what have been termed "vertical" (i.e., between spouse and God) and "horizontal" (i.e., between spouses) dimensions of religiosity (e.g., Benson, Donahue, & Erickson, 1993; Goodenough, 2001). For example, in studying the link between religion and marriage, in addition to studying the aspects of loving and

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supporting interactions between spouses (the horizontal dimension), it must be determined whether one perceives God as one's transcendent moral authority (the vertical dimension) and, if so, what influences that perception may have on marital relationships.

Previous research has revealed that the marriages of those who commit to transcendent moral authority are characterized by distinct marital roles, stricter behavioral requirements, and shared commitment, whereas those who commit to autonomous moral authority have marriages that are also characterized by autonomy (e.g., Jensen, 1998). Thus, some effects on personal meanings and marital relationships have been identified as functions of the presence or lack of commitment to God as a transcendent moral authority in relation to horizontal dimensions. However, processes that link commitment to God as a transcendent moral authority with marital connection are not sufficiently clear. For this purpose, we sought to conduct deeper conceptual analyses in the present study. We pursued qualitative analysis of interviews with couples from various Christian denominations in the United States. We review some literature below that gives background to and supports this research question.

Sources of Moral Authority

Rae (2009) holds that, though forms and expressions of moral authority vary, all sources of moral authority can be classified into two: human constructions or transcendent sources (see also Jones, 2013). Individuals who commit to transcendent moral authority typically believe that God inhabits the supernatural realm and that moral and spiritual truths have a supernatural origin beyond human experience and are thus by nature divinely revealed (Hunter, 1991). In these perceptions, believers attribute ultimate authority to the external transcendent being God and regard this being as greater than the self (see also Schwartz, 1981), thus placing the self in a lower position, committed to obeying the laws and standards of the transcendent authority. In contrast, there are believers who tend to exhibit a commitment to autonomous moral authority. For them, moral and spiritual truths are understood and expressed in human terms (Hunter, 1991). Rather than being revealed from a transcendent being, moral authority may be based in personal experience and centered on one's perception of

one's own emotional needs or psychological disposition. Even if the person believes that moral truths have a connection with a deity, the emphasis is on one's own interpretation of said truths (Jensen, 1998), and on moral reasoning in the current social and relational context. The central premise of this paper is that the two loci of authority affect not only individuals' worldviews, choices, and other psychological processes, but also marriage relationship and functions of religion in marriage.

Some studies have empirically found this effect. Jensen (1998) analyzed a sample of Baptist Christians in the United States and provided illustrative evidence that the commitment to autonomous or transcendent moral authority meaningfully differentiates the relational dynamics working within marriage. She found that the marriages of individuals who emphasized the ethic of autonomy were predominantly social, with an emphasis on emotional needs, care, equality, and choice of roles in marriage. In addition, marriage was conceived as a contractual commitment. According to Jensen, these circumstances are conducive to loose-bounded communities (Merelman, 1984) that espouse individual freedom unbound to rules and hostile to authority or that are conducive to broad socialization that promotes individualism and self-expression (Arnett, 1995). Individuals in that study who emphasized obligations to the divine authority also tended to regard marriage as a sacred vow to God or as instituted and sanctioned by God. They spoke of hierarchies in relationships and differentiation or fixation in marital roles/status that had a divine origin. Generally, these people accepted stricter behavioral requirements in their marital life. Jensen regarded these bonds as typical of tight-bounded communities (Merelman, 1984) that feature structure, hierarchy, and submission to authority, or narrow socialization (Arnett, 1995) that holds obedience and conformity as the highest values. Thus, substantive differences in marriage were identified between those who emphasized divine authority and those who emphasized autonomy.

Baker, Sanchez, Nock, and Wright (2009) found that for couples who chose the legal option of "covenant marriage," the covenant played a role of shared external purpose. Their purpose was inherently religious: it was, through covenant marriage, to serve God. Under this purpose, spouses subordinated their own personal desires to make their marriage work as

a team, accepting and living the prescribed gender roles. In contrast, those in the non-covenant marriage type focused on their internal norms as individuals and on the couples' communication. In both studies, the couples in one group perceived God as the transcendent moral authority and they subordinated their marital processes under this authority, whereas the marriage of those in the other group was based on their individuality and mutual care or communication. Our study particularly focuses on the dynamics and structure that one's consciousness of God as one's transcendent moral authority creates in spouses' psychology and marital relationship, and attempts to find in-depth explanations of these dynamics to add to these studies.

Methods

Participants

We conducted a secondary analysis of family narrative data taken from face-to-face interviews used in the studies of Dollahite, Layton, Bahr, Walker, and Thatcher (2009) and Lambert and Dollahite (2008). Participants were selected through purposive sampling (Berg, 2001). Religious leaders were contacted and asked to identify families in their congregations who could be potential participants. The leaders were asked to recommend families that they believed represented their faith community well. Married couples were interviewed together (for about an hour) and then their adolescent children joined them and they were interviewed together (for about an hour). Most interviews took place in the families' homes (some in places of worship). Interview questions focused on participants' religious beliefs, religious practices, religious communities, marital relationships, and family life.

Forty Christian couples from two New England states (n = 22) and two counties (one urban, one suburban) in Northern California (n = 18) were interviewed in 2002 and 2004, respectively. The number of couples interviewed varied by denominations due to their availability. Due to unavoidable time limitation, out of the 40 couples, we selected 24 couples for analysis, giving consideration to geographical area (12 couples from New England states and 12 from California) and the distribution of denominations from the following six groups: four Catholic, one Greek Orthodox, seven Mainline Protestant (Congregational, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian), five Evangelical Protestant (Baptist, Seventh-day Adventist,

Christian and Missionary Alliance, Pentecostal), seven relatively new Christian faiths (Jehovah's Witness, Latter-day Saint, Christian Science), and one Religious Society of Friends (Quaker). The distribution was determined with the expectation of including couples with both more and less transcendent orientations while reflecting the distributions of the various Christian groups in the U.S. population to some degree. To avoid selection bias, selection within the same denomination was done randomly from among the available interviews. Originally, as the research plan included the analysis of parent-child interview, 26 couples were analyzed at open-coding level. Two interviews were dropped subsequently because these interviews did not include the marriage part of the interviews.

Twenty-three of the couples were Caucasian, and one was Hispanic/Latino. The average age of the spouses was 45.9 for husbands and 44.7 for wives. All couples had at least one child, and the average number of years married was 20.8. The average number of years of education was 15.9. According to their own reports, respondent couples were attending religious worship services at least once a week (with the exception of three couples that attended monthly) and donated an average of 7.4% of their income to their faith community or for other religious purposes.

Coding and Analysis

We followed the methods of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We also incorporated Thomas's (2006) general inductive approach in (1) limiting the scope of theory building to the presentation and the description of the most important categories guided by evaluation objectives of the study (but not by a priori expectations or models) and (2) focusing on revealing "the underlying structure of experiences or processes that are evident in the text data" (p. 238). A general inductive approach is similar to grounded theory in the inductive nature of the actual analysis processes.

We divided the sample into two groups according to the presence of a comment that indicated their individual acknowledgement of God as a transcendent moral authority (transcendent group) or non-presence of it (comparison group). We made an assumption that individuals who did have that acknowledgement would normally speak about it as a part of their faith at least once in a two-hour interview. After this

Table 1

Between-group Comparisons on Religious-Marital Concepts

Group	Comparison		Transcendent		Fisher's Exact Test	
n (Individuals)	12		36			
Number of individuals who referred to the concept	*n*	*%*	*n*	*%*	*df*	*p*
Transcendent Self-reflection in Marriage	1	(8.3)	27	(75.0)	1	.025
Shared Obedience to God	1	(8.3)	25	(69.4)	1	.026
God-strengthened Marital Bond	1	(8.3)	29	(80.6)	1	.013
Support & Encourage Faith	3	(25.0)	22	(61.1)	1	.236
Shared Religious Practice	6	(50.0)	27	(75.0)	1	.590
Shared Religious Commitment	4	(33.3)	23	(63.9)	1	.386
Receiving Blessings	4	(33.3)	28	(77.8)	1	.255

classification into two groups, we analyzed the individuals' statements about the interface of religion and marriage. The units of analysis were the individual and the couple, and, for each coding, the context of reference (the individual or marriage) was marked; only one context of reference was assigned to each coding.

After conceptual categories were generated as a result of open and axial coding, the categories specific to the individuals in the transcendent group were determined by comparing the number of people who mentioned the concept in each group. We used Fisher's exact test for this purpose. In order to effectively answer our research question, after the conceptual categories were specified to the transcendent group, special attention was paid to the underlying structure of experiences or processes. More specifically, the structure and dynamics were analyzed as to how individuals' consciousness of God as transcendent moral authority played a role in the religious-marital concepts that emerged. We also examined how these structures were different from the counterparts of the comparison group. Selective coding was conducted along with these analyses of structure and dynamics in search for common themes of the emerged categories. For the entire coding and analysis process, the coder (the first author) blinded himself to the denominations of the couples with an assistant's aid. We used the qualitative software program NVIVO (versions 8, 9, and 10) to assist with the coding procedure.

Results

Thirty-six individuals acknowledged transcendent moral authority of God in the interview, and we classified these individuals as the transcendent group, and the other twelve individuals as the comparison group. Table 1 lists concepts mentioned by the majority of the sample (more than twenty-four individuals). As a result of open and axial coding, seven mutually exclusive concepts emerged, and Fisher's exact test indicated three of them to be distinctive to the transcendent group. Definitions and the examples of the seven concepts are listed in the Appendix, and Table 1 contrasts the number of individuals in the two groups who mentioned each concept. The three bolded concepts are the ones that we consider particular to the transcendent group, and all three turned out to be forms of marital bonding that engaged God in some way. Now we focus on these three concepts and describe the results of our in-depth qualitative analysis of them. Then we explain common themes that emerged in the selective coding process.

Transcendent Self-reflection in Marriage

Transcendent self-reflection refers to a situation in which, with reference to God's will or with the intention to obey God, a spouse critically reflects upon him- or herself in order to regulate or change his or her own unfavorable behaviors in the marriage. For those who see God as their transcendent moral authority, building or maintaining a good marital relationship and mending marital conflicts are issues of

accountability to God. Andrew and Lucas, with their recognition of God's moral authority, claimed the following:

> Andrew: how I treat my wife, to some extent, or my children is the way I'm going to be treated. And, I feel, the way God looks at me, He would not be pleased with me if I wouldn't, if I would conduct myself badly in the family. So there's my accountability there that I feel . . . to Him and the way I treat my family. Make sure I'm doing things, you know, His way. So, it becomes important.

> Lucas: And I think that [avoiding marital conflict is] really not such a matter of the particular thing you do, whether it's prayer or Bible study, or even just sort of talking through stuff. Because I think all sort of comes under our allegiance to Christ and his Lordship over us. And basically whatever it is that we talk about or pray about or read about, or whatever, that reminds us of that and allows us to apply it in that situation.

For Andrew, the well-being of a marital relationship requires his pleasing God. For Lucas, the essence of avoiding marital conflict is his and his wife's allegiance to the transcendent moral authority of Christ. Their shared religious practices are subsumed under this moral order. There are many others who offered comments like these, such as one respondent who stated, "I have to stand in front of God for what I did and did not do [for his wife]."

There is a robust assumption behind these understandings: they all express the idea that God requires spouses to treat each other with love and care. Andrew, for example, suggested that God is pleased when he treats his wife nicely because that is God's way. Anthony and Landon illustrated more on this point:

> Anthony: I want to be a better servant to the Lord. . . . The Word says don't be harsh to your wife. Okay, as a husband. I'm a Christian, I should be loving, the Word said, loving. . . . I'm trying to be an image of the Lord.

> Landon: The more I submit to God,

the better a husband I become. . . You want to be the best you can and obviously that helps your mate because you're striving towards God, which is pure in truth and love. If they say God is love and you're striving towards love, that can only help your partner out.

Anthony believes that, as a servant of the Lord, he is commanded to treat his wife in loving ways and that, in doing so, he is acting in accordance with God's image. For Landon, because God encompasses the kind of love he believes is ideal to a marriage, his striving toward God appears to better his marital relationship. Then he explained, "The recognition of your sins and your spiritual sensitivity grows when you're striving to be like God or to be with God. So you realize a lot easier [when his way of treating his wife is not in accordance with God's way]." As he desires to become like his loving God, he becomes more sensitive to the things that contrast to God's love in the marriage context. These people, thus, strived not only to obey God, who commands love in marriage, but also to model themselves after a loving God and incorporate that image into their marital behaviors.

For some, acknowledging the transcendent moral authority of God and trying to get closer to God results in a heightened personal understanding of the standard of caring in marriage and helps them to behave less obstinately toward their spouses. Natalie, for instance, expressed humility or teachability before God as the key to a good marital relationship:

> Natalie: The closer I feel to my Heavenly Father, . . .what happens is I take chastisement better. I receive inspiration from Heavenly Father to know what I need to be working on. So for example, I might go to him in prayer and say, "I am so frustrated with Gabriel because he keeps doing this" or something that's hurting me or caused me heartache or something. And then I feel him telling me, "Well you know, you did this." And so I'm like, "Okay fine." And it helps me to stop and see my side of it where sometimes in an argument you're equally at fault.

By accepting what she thinks as chastisement from God, Natalie believes that she becomes teachable,

humbly accepting God's direction. As prayer leads her to "stop and see [her] side," frustration with her husband is blunted, and she is brought to the point of self-reflection by God as her transcendent moral authority. This redirection is more clearly illustrated by Lucas and Michelle, who described what happens to them internally when they encounter marital conflict:

> Lucas: I was really very sort of judgmental and . . . so really had to do a fair amount of "Wait, what God wants me to do here is this, not what comes to me instinctively." So there was a lot of that that we had to sort of apply to the marriage.

> Michelle: Now I watch. I think, "Where is this thought leading me? Is this my thought? Is this the way I feel? Is this a thought from God? No." And so then you just deal with it right away.

The redirection that took place for Lucas in marital conflict moved him from his natural character (judgmental) to what God wants him to be (nonjudgmental). Michelle's redirection, similarly, contrasts thoughts that do not come from God with those that do. For both of them, these redirections resulted from their coming back to the consciousness of God as their transcendent moral authority.

In these examples of transcendent self-reflection in marriage, there is a common ordered pattern that redirects a spouse to a marital bond. Self-reflection begins with their recognizing the transcendent moral authority of God, and subsequently involves re-positioning oneself away from a preoccupation with one's immediate emotions or concerns (i.e., self-centeredness) toward the image of a God who both demands and exemplifies relational love. This ontological redirection with the particular symbolic structure among God, spouse, and the self seems to underlie all these cases, at least on the occasions of these episodes. Their perception of God as an authority-model plays the central role in this movement. Mark's next comment succinctly summarizes this whole redirection process:

> Mark: When you have an authority, a loving God in your life, who you're trying to emulate, then you can go to the Word that describes his love and his way of dealing with others. And you can measure yourself against

that. And that generally brings us back to a common ground.

The individuals in the comparison group tried to solve their marital conflict in different ways. God as transcendent moral authority was never mentioned, except by one individual. Instead, individuals in the comparison group said that, as couples, they either tended to basically agree, and therefore avoid conflict because they had similar values, or that they solved/avoided conflicts through communication. They answered on how to resolve or avoid conflicts:

> Jordan: We communicate a lot. We always take two times out of the day to communicate. One in the morning and one in the evening. And so we talk about each other. Whether it's as boring as can be, it's still what you did during the day, and so it works for us. And we kind of think alike.

> Brenda: [as to what resolves marital conflicts] That which is beyond me. So has that helped? It helps some. But that's not the real solution. The real solution seems to be more, you know, talking and listening. Listening, listening, really hearing each other. And I think the stuff we talked about before, the basic underpinnings, the basic values, the basic commitment, all that stuff, which is tied in, intricately, woven with our faith . . .

Rather than focusing on God, Jordan and Brenda indicated that they focused on better communication and their basic similarities. There is no process involved through which one's authority is reconsidered or one's identity is reflected upon, ontologically redirected, or changed. Rather than transcendent self-reflection, they preserve their identity and try to understand and incorporate their spouse. In this sense, in these marital processes, the locus of authority seems to be kept within themselves: no process is involved that turns it over to an external transcendent source. The focus is more on respecting and coordinating each other's rights.

God-strengthened Marital Bond

The second concept is that of a God-strengthened marital bond. The individuals in the transcendent group expressed the belief that God's strength and influence reinforced the marital bond. They perceived these effects as coming

from the grace of God, a power above their own strength. As Albert stated, "It's by the grace of God that we're married for 19 years. [otherwise] There's no way, I don't believe there's any way, that we would be able to be still be married." He sees the grace of God as something that transcends their inclinations, which might otherwise lead to unfriendly behaviors that detach themselves from each other.

In this state or movement of unification induced by the grace of God, they receive confidence, guidance, perspective, or dependable support for developing a loving attitude and changing their characters. Mike and Kevin illustrated this when they stated,

> Mike: That's what I was thinking is self-centeredness. I'd probably have a bit more problem with that, and other things too, that you know. I really feel the Lord's done a lot of work in certain areas of my life to make me more acceptable to Alyssa. So, and one of them was probably self-centeredness. And just doing my own thing, versus you know, taking time to talk and, you know, have kind of a marriage.

> Kevin: For example, we believe that loyalty is a quality that God highly favors. And loyalty should have a role, certainly, in marriage. So there are enough qualities like that that we feel are from God's spirit. The Holy Spirit, in fact . . . Galatians tells about the fruitage of the Spirit: kindness, peace, long-suffering, mildness. So those things . . . we think God is influencing us with His spirit to display those qualities, which obviously have an important part in marriage.

Mike explicitly expressed that it was God who worked to change his character to make him less self-centered and more loving toward his wife, and Kevin perceived that God granted the fruits of the Spirit to both the husband and the wife. In both cases, God was regarded as a transcendent being who held the power or attributes, exceeding the couples' capacities, to positively transform their personalities.

Participants' sense of receiving God's strengthening influence was often accompanied by the individuals' or the couples' effort to approach God.

Natalie said, "I've noticed that the closer I feel to my Heavenly Father, the more forgiving I am." For her, closeness to God and a forgiving attitude toward her husband correspond. Similarly for others, their perception of God's being in the center of marriage was associated with his strengthening influence. In Renee's words, "we're in a covenant not only with ourselves, but with God. And that gives us, just the patience to work through disagreements and to have this central core, which we can come back to." Renee believes, God, from whom a couple gains the patience and strength needed to heal their relationships, is the common center of a good marriage. In a similar covenant relationship, Laura perceived God as playing even more proactive roles:

> Laura: He also made a covenant relation with us where He will never abandon us. And that, those promises through scripture, I think are very deep . . . those have a profound impact on our covenant and promise to each other. You know, that we can have the strength to do that through God because He's the one that first loved us in that way.

She saw God as the provider and enhancer of marital love, believed that God initiated loving, and held that this love strengthened and maintained the marriage. For her, God was actively doing this as his part in the covenant with the couple.

The most salient and common characteristic of this bond is that, rather than conceiving an impersonal "effect" or "force" holding the couple together, they perceived the presence of a personal God within their marriage, understood as an accessible transcendent being who gives direct support to a marriage. As a personal being, God was described as having love and various other attributes (such as peace) that enriched and strengthened the marriage. God was also assumed to have had a purpose for uniting the couple.

In the comparison group, however, no individual mentioned a personal God strengthening the marital bond, except one. They perceived and underscored the blessings of religion in a comparatively impersonal form. For instance, William mentioned, "I can't imagine how I would deal with it without [his religion's name]. If there wasn't this religion for me to use, for all I know, we would have been divorced." William's religion helps to maintain his marital

relationship. In this sense, he is using something from religion, but the way he attributes credit to impersonal "religion" contrasts sharply with the following comment from Anthony, who belongs to the transcendent group: "First, we made our relationship with the Lord; and He put our relationship together. So without the Lord we cannot function." Anthony focuses on a personal Lord in relational rather than instrumental terms and values the Lord's proactive intervention in maintaining the relationship. Lois's comment also illustrates this perception on impersonal religion:

> Lois: I think what comes from the religion in strengthening the marriage is that there'll be ups and downs but you know you're going to get through it and you really have to have the communication. And the communication, I think, can be there because it can be through your own prayer or it can be direct. There's just always a way to be talking and working through anything.

Lois perceives the helping effects of religion to marriage, and religion is instrumental to their communication, but it is the communication on which she focuses. For Lois, the main character is not God, but the couple themselves.

How does the perception of God as a transcendent moral authority, then, associate with God-strengthened marital bonds? There were not many participant comments that directly explained this association. However, a case of Michelle, who used the following metaphor to describe what maintains their marital relationship, illustrates an example of it. "God," she said, "is at the center of one of those old wagon wheels and the spokes. So the closer we get on each one of those spokes to the center, the closer we are to each other." Elaborating on what she meant by this metaphor, she defined God as "love" and as "good and in control and totally wise. . . loving parent." In her marriage, she held, "The more we really yield to the love and the wisdom and power and the goodness of God, really, in our daily life, the less we have a need to be self-righteous, willful, self-justifying."

These comments conceptually overlap, somewhat, with transcendent self-reflection in marriage. Here, however, we can focus first on the fact that she perceived God as having a combination of superior attributes and that she values

yielding to this comprehensive God as opposed to self-centering. The metaphor of the wagon wheels in her first comment seems to parallel this sense of yielding to an integrated God. This perception of the integration or comprehensiveness of the character of God is important for her, as she perceives God as personal, not impersonal. Second, the word "yielding" in this context suggests giving way to something. Combined with the way she defined and described God—"God is love and is good and in control and totally wise"—we can see that she believes God is her transcendent authority and that she is giving way to it. However, the next comment suggests an additional dimension of yielding—that it means yielding to love and the goodness of God that she believes:

> Yeah, if I think things are getting off balance with us, I realize I need to get closer to God. And when I do, then if something needs to be talked out with Bill, if I think something's bothering him, first I try to make sure I'm all whole myself. So I think the healing happens mentally and internally more so than discussion. I mean, the discussion will be the effect of the internal healing, so I think when I'm all clear mentally about God being my real husband and God being love *and my being in that love*, then I feel free to bring up to Bill, "What's wrong here?"

This comment overlaps with transcendent self-reflection in marriage and shows the order of the primacy of God discussed above; but it also shows she is functionally *enabled* by God to love her husband. She perceives God as not only loving in general or personally loving to her, but also as is the source of marital love; it is important for Michelle to get close to God and be connected to God's love, as she perceives, in order to exercise it in her marriage. Yielding to love seems to include this meaning.

It is also noticeable that in the second comment, her giving way to God's transcendent authority, reconciling with God, and being one with God's grace in marital love might have been expressed in her phrase "to yield." Her personal recognition of the transcendent authority of God and what we termed a God-strengthened marital bond seem to have an inseparable association with her perception of the personality of God.

Shared Obedience to God

The individuals in the transcendent group not only acknowledged God as the transcendent moral authority individually, but many talked about how they shared as a couple the goals or the attitude to obey God together. We coded this phenomenon as "shared obedience to God" when either the husband or wife expressed the concept that both of them obeyed, served, or were devoted to God as a couple. Unlike transcendent self-reflection in marriage where the spouses tried to meet the requirements on marital relationship, in shared obedience to God, they talked about their submission to God or what they perceived as the will and the purpose of God. (To avoid conceptual overlap, the comments about shared obedience that were focused on improving the marital relationship were excluded from this category.) And also, here, the unit undergoing the process is the couple rather than the individual. Alice, for example, discussed her and her husband's shared obedience to God as follows:

> Alice: I think the goals have changed, too, since our faith has been developed. I mean, from, I don't know, probably, well, to earn enough money so you can retire and be comfortable basically. And with a faith and involved, I think you've got more of a focus on how can I be of service to Christ. How can we raise our children so that they develop their own faith and have that relationship with Christ? You know that it changes your focus in your marriage. . . . I think once you both have that faith, the focus changes, and I think it changes pretty much to be the same if you really trust the word of God and understand his purpose in life for you and for your life.

Here, she expresses the belief that as their faith developed their shared goals as a couple have been transformed. She reports becoming less self-focused and adopting more sacrificial values directed toward serving Christ. As both husband and wife experienced this change, the goals of the two have become more homogeneous, with both focused more on obeying God's purpose than on seeking comfort of life. Their process of renouncing desires for self-satisfaction and, instead, obeying the divine will is similar to that found in transcendent self-reflection in marriage;

however, this time, the goals are more focused on serving and obeying God as they seek the same purpose.

One distinctive feature of this concept is that as the couple focuses on obeying what they think as the will of God in a sacrificial manner, their felt closeness to each other increases. Judy and Angela illustrate this point:

> Judy: I think the main thing is that your focus is no longer on you as a person like, "How can he please me?" But, "How can we please God?" And I think that that is how God, how your relationship with God can bring the both of you closer. You're not focused on you.

> Angela: I think of the gospel [reading] we chose for our wedding, was "Seek first the kingdom." And I know for both Brian and I, that is, that's what unites us; and that's our kind of joined spirituality.

Judy describes a directional change from a self-centered, instrumental use of God to sacrificial service of God; as a consequence, the now decentered spouses, who have committed to serving God, feel closer. Notably, in her conversation, the self-centered "me" (singular object) is transformed to "we" (plural subject), as if the spouses' service to God now gives them a shared identity as one unit seeking one goal. Angela also feels that she and her husband are acting as one joint unit, united in the service of God's kingdom.

Some couples' shared obedience to God was described in the form of praying to God together and following the answers they receive, as Ella describes:

> Ella: All our decisions are made through prayer, through receiving through prayer a confirmation or a good feeling inside that what we're doing for our family, or what we're doing as a couple, or what we're doing for work, what, you know, the big decisions, we're feeling that God is giving us those good feelings, or bad feelings, to help direct us to where we need to be, because He knows it. He knows, obviously, much more than we do, and He'll help get us where we need to be.

Both she and her husband pray to God and ask for his direction. They perceive God as omniscient, and they both listen to this divine authority and try to obey its guidance. Alyssa points out that such an attitude on the part of couples can promote marital unity because "when you're both praying to the same God, He's giving you the same answers." Thus, for these individuals, sharing the divine transcendent moral authority and sharing the attitude of obedience result in closeness to each other.

The individuals in the comparison group, on the other hand, did not express shared obedience to God. Some of them mentioned shared religious commitment (commitment to religion in general or aspects of religion) but not shared obedience to God as a transcendent moral authority. For example, Owen and Eric commented as follows:

> Owen: Brenda and I live a very non-materialistic life. And I often think of this in faith terms. In terms of being, us being other than the mainstream consumer culture.

> Eric: We've been on numerous committees [at church] over time . . . So it's given us common ground really that we're walking this path together.

In these examples, Owen explained his religious commitment in terms of choosing religious values with his wife. Eric explained it in terms of finding meaning and value while serving the church together with his wife. In both, they have committed to their religion as a couple. However, there were no comment of theirs that explicitly expressed a maritally shared attitude of obedience to God who might be regarded as one having personality and authority, as in the previous examples. In that regard, there is a distinction in these types of shared commitment.

Common Factors Among the Three Dynamics

As a result of selective coding process, we found several factors that were common to the three concepts above. One principle was that these spouses and couples introduced a perceived *personal* God into the marriage. For them, God is believed to be an authority, a model, and a provider. The spouses and the couples build relationships with this perceived personal God by obeying, serving, emulating, identifying with, or feeling close to God, and by receiving grace from God. In their language, God is not perceived in formal, superficial, or instrumental terms; rather, God plays a central role in marriage, both as an authoritative parental figure to submit to and as a model and a provider of relational strength and spiritual attributes that the couple can emulate and practice between each other. Thus, in respect to symbolic structure, a vertical personal relationship with God is integrated with a horizontal personal ethic of marital care and union. And finally in this manner, they center in God in a way that their marital relationships are characterized by their dealings with God. In addition to simply interpersonal descriptions of marital bond, they perceive and enact these transcendent forms of marital dynamic.

Discussion

To explore what it is about religion that relates to marriage, we classified outcomes according to theologically substantive concepts and elaborated on them from the viewpoints of their sociopsychological functions in marriage. The present study focused on one question: What kind of dynamics does an individual's perception of God as transcendent moral authority create in marital relationships? We found three dynamics that were distinctive to those who perceived and expressed the transcendent moral authority of God, that is, transcendent self-reflection in marriage, a God-strengthened marital bond, and shared obedience to God. Several points about the findings of the present study need to be highlighted with regards to previous studies and theoretical concerns.

Snarey and Dollahite (2001) stated that, "family and religious life interact to advance the psyche's deepest commitments and highest ideals" (p. 646). The present study demonstrates that a transcendent approach toward God, in which individuals regard God as their transcendent moral authority, does in fact influence deep commitments and ideals pertaining to marriage. The three dynamics explain how God, marriage, and individuals' psychology intermingled, which result in marital unity. These dynamics share some basic structure with a religious marriage described by Jensen (1998) and Baker, et al. (2009), but, with additional features, more details and integration. Jensen (1998)'s finding that the orthodox couples regarded marriage as a sacred vow to God or instituted and sanctioned by God was confirmed in the present study. Just like in Jensen's participants, many of our participants suggested that obedience and conformity were

their highest values. Our findings have much in common with the structure Baker, et al. (2009) found in that, those in the transcendent group shared goals to serve God and subordinated self-desires for marital coherence. However, in addition to these findings of Baker, et al. and Jensen, we also found that they perceived God's active influence in strengthening marriage.

The perception of the transcendent moral authority of God creates a center goal in the marital bond described in the *shared obedience to God* category. What we termed *transcendent self-reflection in marriage* provides an explanation of how the perception of God as moral authority triggers spouses' self-regulatory behavioral change in seeking for better marital relationship. This, as well as a *God-strengthened marital bond*, could be one form of dynamics that explain change in quality (e.g., self-repair), not quantity, of dyadic relationship which Fincham, et al. (2007) referred to in their study of transformative processes in marriage. A *God-strengthened marital bond* conceptually overlaps significantly with sanctification of marriage (Mahoney, et al., 1999), especially with the concept of manifestation of God in marriage. However, our study found that this dimension was distinctive to individuals who perceived the transcendent moral authority of God.

We highlight here that although the dimension of authority was associated with each of these dynamics, this dimension did not seem to be the only aspect of God that was significant for these couples and their marital relationships. Participants described God more as an authority-model: they described emulating, identifying with, or feeling close to God who, for them, was a model of relational love, and also receiving grace from God. Their approach to God as their divine moral authority was one dimension that contributed to the differences in quality (e.g., transcendent, or transformative) of marital bonds, and was closely associated with these other approaches to God that also seemed to have impacted the religious and relational qualities of the bonds.

Using a similar dataset as the present study, Lambert and Dollahite (2008) found that including God in marriage enhanced and stabilized marital commitment. The present study confirmed it as a part of its findings, and added to it deeper analysis of the enhancing and stabilizing effects on marriage and laid out the dynamics. Dollahite, Hawkins, and Parr (2012) found that individuals talked about their marriage as having broader implications than the self, the couple per se, or the family unit: the marriage had dimensions of transcendence toward multi-directions (divine, familial, or social) presenting a counterpoint to individualization of contemporary marriage. The present study elaborated the aspect of transcendence toward the divinity direction, especially in relation with God, and added relational dynamics that lead to strengthening of marital union.

The present study adds to the existing literature on the relation between Christian religious orientations and marital connections especially those of couples who commit to God as a transcendent moral authority. Particularly, it revealed some substantive description of psychological and relational processes, symbolic structures within marriage, and meanings pertaining to their marital connection in relation with their perceptions of God. However, these are only small aspects of what religion possibly does to marriage. A number of participants discussed some possible negative aspects of commitment to transcendent moral authority. They included an authoritarian relationship over their spouse and tendency to quest for God and consequently, neglect their spouses. We consider these cases as the commitment's lacking integration with marital care.

The size of the sample of the present study was limited. The interview did not contain questions about subjective wellbeing of marriage, such as marital satisfaction, that would serve as outcome measures. It is desirable that future studies investigate how the God-marriage processes we portrayed in the present study relate to marital outcome variables. In studying the structural dynamics between religion and marriage, we recommend consideration of the vertical dimension (commitment to transcendent moral authority of God, or obedience) and the horizontal dimension (marital loving relationships) in one integrated picture.

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Appendix

A Priori and Inductively Developed Thematic Categories

Thematic Categories	Definitions	Examples from the interview
A priori category		
God as Transcendent Moral Authority	Perception of God as the individual's transcendent moral authority	I think the influence is most definitely, the word of God is my primary influence because I answer to God for all of this.
Inductively developed categories		
Transcendent Self-reflection in Marriage	A spouse critically reflects one's marital behavior with reference to God and change it for the better	Religion helps you think about treating other people in the way that God would want you to treat them and I think both of us try to apply that to our marriage relationship. "How can I treat Natalie better?"
Shared Obedience to God	Couple sharing the goals or the attitudes to obey or devote to God together (goals to better marriage were excluded)	I think of the gospel [reading] we chose for our wedding, was "seek first the kingdom [of God]." And I know for both Brian and I, that is, that's what unites us; and that's our kind of joined spirituality.
God-strengthened Marital Bond	Perception of God strengthening the marital bond, or God increasing one's capacity to love one's spouse	I don't think we would have had a relationship with each other if God hadn't been influential in our lives. There was a lot of things that He worked on in my life to straighten me out. To make me a better husband.
Support & Encourage Faith	Supporting, encouraging, or expecting spouse's faith; or being supported and encouraged in faith by spouse	Sometimes you feel stronger in your faith than other times, like if things aren't going real well for some reason. And I think that's when we help each other a lot. If I'm down, she helps bring me up and prays for me a lot.
Shared Religious Practice	Couple engaging together in religious practice (e.g., prayer, scripture reading, fasting, going to church, receiving Communion)	If there's a crisis, we always pray together, but you know, it's not really good just to leave it for that. It would be better if it were regular.
Shared Religious Commitment	Couple sharing commitment to religion or religious goals (shared obedience to God was excluded)	The focus on spirituality and its importance in life has, it helps us to confine or limit, set boundaries with our family, that prevent us from being diverted or distracted into pursuits that are not what we consider spiritually healthy.
Receiving Blessings	Perception of receiving benefit from God or religion to marriage in either temporal or spiritual domain (God-strengthened Marital Bond was excluded)	We walked into this house and it seemed right [to move into], and it felt good, and I think we both knew that that was right and it was an answer to our prayers.

Note. The bolded thematic categories are unique to individuals in the transcendent group.