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# The Threefold Cord

## Marital Commitment in Religious Couples

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This study reports results from in-depth interviews with 57 highly religious middle-aged married couples representing the major Abrahamic faiths (Christianity, Judaism, Islam) and residing in New England and Northern California. The study uses grounded theory methods to create themes that describe the ways that religiosity influences marital commitment. Couples reported that religious beliefs and practices helped them include God as the third partner in their marriage, believe in marriage as a religious institution that lasts, and find meaning in committing to marriage.

**Keywords:** *commitment; God; marriage; meaning; purpose; perspective; vows*

“**F**or better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part.” These and similar vows and covenants are made by hundreds of thousands of couples each year across America. In front of family and friends and in the name of God, people pledge to be committed to their spouses in any and all circumstances. Yet the divorce rate indicates that many couples find that keeping their marital vows are not as easy as speaking them. However, many religious couples report that God is an important part of their marriage and that this enhances their commitment in marriage.

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## **Background and Significance**

Commitment to both spouse and the institution of marriage appears to be important to the success of a marriage. In fact, Clements and Swensen (2000) found that commitment to the spouse was the strongest predictor of marital quality. Fenell (1993) found that lifetime commitment to marriage was the attribute most frequently mentioned as important by participants in successful, long-term marriages. Respondents to a similar study ranked commitment as second-most important (Robinson & Blanton, 1993). These findings demonstrate the important role of relational commitment in marital quality.

Perhaps commitment is a strong predictor of marital quality because, as Stanley (2005) noted, it is related to better communication, greater happiness, and more constructive behavior during difficulties. Thus, because commitment appears to play an important role in the quality of marital relationships, examining factors that may enhance marital commitment is important and needed. Religiosity seems to be one important factor of commitment in marriage.

## **Religiosity and Marital Commitment**

Scant research has examined the direct influence of religiosity on marital commitment. Larson and Goltz (1989) found that church attendance was a major predictor of commitment to marriage; they proposed that part of the reason for this may be that leaving a marital relationship within a religious community may be more difficult because of the constraints against divorce and the supports for remaining together. They conjectured that religious emphasis on the importance of marriage may be part of the reason that church-attending couples experience greater commitment to their marriage. Despite the dearth of research that has directly examined the link between religiosity and marital commitment, there seem to be other indicators of this relationship, such as a lower divorce rate and a lower prevalence of cohabitation before marriage among religious couples, as we discuss below.

## **Religiosity and Marital Stability**

Religiosity appears to be related to marital stability. For example, greater religiosity has been related to reduced risk of divorce (Brealt & Kposowa, 1987; Glenn & Supancic, 1984; Heaton & Goodman, 1985; Shrum, 1980). Mahoney, Pargament, Swank, and Tarakeshwar (2001) found that those

who attended church on a regular basis had a 44% divorce rate, compared with a 60% rate for those who did not attend. There exist several possible explanations for lower divorce rates among religious couples. Lambert and Dollahite (2006) found that religiosity instilled in couples a desire for relationship permanence, which helped them work through conflict. Other research has found that marital commitment was strongest when couples have a clear sense of future together (Waite & Joyner, 2001). It may be that religiosity instills in couples a sense of future together, which gives them increased incentives to stay together.

Another reason for this association may be that religiosity fosters commitment not only to an individual but also to the institution of marriage. McDonald (1981) discussed institutional commitment and noted that it differs from commitment to a specific person. Levinger (1976) asserted that this type of commitment may serve as a barrier to divorce, even when marital quality is low. Thus, perhaps religious involvement increases an individual's commitment to both a religious institution, which forbids or strongly discourages divorce, and the institution of marriage itself. In this way, there would be greater disincentives for religious individuals to seek a divorce.

Conversely, religiosity may weaken marital commitment and thus be related to increased levels of divorce—for example, when individuals within a marriage disagree on which church to attend or on their level of involvement. In fact, Curtis and Ellison (2002) reported that disparities in religious attendance patterns are consistently linked with more frequent marital disagreements, which may partially explain why Call and Heaton (1997) found that the risk of marital dissolution was nearly 3 times greater when the wife regularly attends religious services and the husband never attends. In addition, Ellison, Bartkowski, and Anderson (1999) found that religious dissimilarity was associated with a heightened risk of domestic violence. However, Shehan, Bock, and Lee (1990) reported that heterogamy was not adversely related to marital satisfaction in a Catholic sample. Thus, religious heterogamy may not be problematic for couples of all denominations, but it appears to be an obstacle to marital commitment for many.

## **Religiosity, Commitment, and Cohabitation**

Commitment is often included in discussions of cohabitation. Several studies have shown that couples who cohabit before getting married have lower levels of commitment and higher likelihood of divorce than do those who do not cohabit before marrying (e.g., Booth & Johnson, 1988; Thompson & Colella, 1992). Thornton, Axinn, and Hill (1992) found that

religiosity was negatively related to cohabitation. In fact, they found that the cohabitation rate among nonreligious individuals was 50% higher than among church-attending Protestants. This relationship may be partly due to self-selection. It is highly probable that an individual who is entering a union with the intent to test the waters is qualitatively different from an individual who enters a religious covenant in front of family and friends; self-selection likely accounts for much of the variance in commitment level between these two individuals.

Although these studies provide clues about how religiosity might be related to commitment in marriage, studies that explore this relationship directly are sparse. Thus, the current study explores the process by which religiosity influences marital commitment, to set the stage for future research in this area. As such, two research questions directed this study: Do highly religious couples perceive that their beliefs and religious practices uniquely influence their level of marital commitment? If so, to what extent and how does religiosity affect marital commitment?

## Theoretical Perspectives

Religion has been conceptualized on several levels over the past centuries. Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) conceptualized religion on a societal level. Durkheim (1897/1951) wrote, "Religion is in a word the system of symbols by means of which society becomes conscious of itself; it is the characteristic way of thinking of collective existence" (p. 312). Essentially, Durkheim emphasized religion as being manifested in social experience (Greenwood, 1990) and as an expression of a society. Perhaps a Durkheimian view of religion and marital commitment might be that commitment in marriage is emphasized in many religions because of the value that society places on committed relationships.

Conversely, Carl Jung (1875-1961) focused on the individual level and the psychological aspects of religion, emphasizing both the conscious and the unconscious elements within each person that become the means of psychological salvation. He conceptualized religion as being a reverence and a fear for forces that operate on an intuitive level beyond the five senses (Greenwood, 1990). A Jungian perspective of marital commitment would likely emphasize that in addition to a conscious influence, religious fear and reverence for a higher being may influence an individual's commitment to marriage on an unconscious level.

More recently, Mahoney et al. (1999) conceptualized religion on the dyadic level through their concept of the sanctification of marriage. They described their theoretical perspective as follows:

Sanctification of marriage refers to perceptions of one's marriage having spiritual character and significance. We propose two different indexes of the sanctification of marriage: (a) individuals may view their marriage as having sacred qualities, and (b) individuals may experience marriage as a manifestation of God. The former appraisal process occurs when individuals attribute qualities to their marriage that are often used by spiritual or religious traditions to describe divine entities or transcendent phenomena. Such qualities include the adjectives of "blessed," "holy," "heavenly," "religious," and "spiritual." This form of the sanctification of marriage reflects the degree to which partners characterize their marriage in spiritual terms, *apart* from personal or institutional beliefs about the role(s) that external, divine entities (e.g. God, Jesus, Higher Power) may play in marriage. . . . A more traditional, theocentric (i.e., God-centered) index of the sanctification of marriage is the degree to which partners believe their marriage is a manifestation of their beliefs or experiences of God and their religious faith. This religious variable taps the extent to which partners perceive God to be active or reflected in the marital relationship. (pp. 322-323)

Mahoney et al. would likely perceive marital commitment as being reinforced by the couple's perceived sacred qualities in their relationship and by their perception of God's manifestation in their marriage.

Although sociological and psychological theories are relevant in a discussion of religiosity and marital commitment, the current study focuses on these variables at the dyadic level. Whereas grounded theory was the central method applied in this study, Mahoney et al.'s sanctification of marriage theory (1999) guided the development of our broader religion and marriage project, of which marital commitment was one important aspect. For example, Mahoney et al.'s theory provided the framework for formulating interview questions, which, as in any study, have a large influence on what is found. Decades of research have been conducted on the basis of classical theorists such as Durkheim and Jung, but such studies are limited in scope because they focus solely on society or the individual. The current study, using a dyadic theory, provides unique and important information regarding how and why religiosity is related to commitment in marriage.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were interviewed by the second author in New England (2002) and in Northern California (2004). Consistent with Boss's proposition (1980) that much can be learned by using a sample that is prototypical of the variable of interest, we sought a purposive sample (Berg, 2001; Denzin &

Lincoln, 1994) of highly religious families. The goal was to recruit participants that were united in their involvement in a faith community, regardless of denomination. Participants were obtained through the referrals of 38 leaders from Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities, who recommended members of their congregation whom they considered to be especially involved. Additionally, our criteria for sampling involved the desire to reach a sufficient number of participants to achieve conceptual saturation, whereby after a certain number of interviews, additional couples are mainly repeating what others have reported (Lofland & Lofland, 1995).

The sample consisted of 57 married couples (57 husbands, 57 wives) coming from the three major monotheistic, or Abrahamic, faiths: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Mean ages of the husbands and wives were 48 and 45, respectively. Of the 57 couples interviewed, 48 were Caucasian and 9 (16%) were ethnic minorities (African American,  $n = 2$ ; Caucasian/Hispanic,  $n = 4$ ; East Indian,  $n = 2$ ; Malaysian/Caucasian,  $n = 1$ ). The sample was well educated, with the mean level of education for the husbands and wives 17 years and 16 years, respectively. Participants had been married for an average of 21 years and were fairly religious, attending services on average of once a week and contributing on average about 7% of their income to their faith communities and other religious causes. Couples varied in religious observance, orthodoxy, and conservatism but were considered among the most involved by leaders of their faith communities. Couples were from the following faith communities: Catholic ( $n = 6$ ), Orthodox Christian (Greek Orthodox, Orthodox Church in America;  $n = 3$ ), Jewish (Ultra-Orthodox, Modern Orthodox, Conservative, Reform;  $n = 12$ ), Muslim (all Sunni;  $n = 4$ ), Mainline Protestant (Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Lutheran, Methodist;  $n = 12$ ), New Christian Traditions (Christian Science, Jehovah's Witness, Latter-day Saint, Seventh-day Adventist, Religious Society of Friends;  $n = 12$ ), and Evangelical Protestant (Baptist, Charismatic Episcopal, Orthodox Presbyterian, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Pentecostal;  $n = 8$ ).

## Method

To achieve the desired levels of depth of information, intensive interviewing (Lofland & Lofland, 1995) was employed to allow couples to discuss various aspects of the linkage between religiosity and marriage. Interviews typically lasted 1 hour. Couples were asked 15 questions, one of which was a direct question about religiosity and covenant making ("Does the concept of covenant have meaning for you in your marriage?"). However, couples also discussed marital commitment in response to other

questions. The questions were reviewed by faculty and students for face validity and were pilot-tested with three couples; minor revisions were made based on feedback. In addition to the questions asked of all couples, follow-up questions were asked for clarification, if necessary. Leading questions were avoided (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). All participant names were replaced with pseudonyms.

All couple interviews were conducted with spouses together. We think it a sound practice for qualitative research on marital interaction to include interviewing couples together because it allows them to co-create meaning. We concur with Babbie (2004), who said that interviewing people together “frequently brings out aspects of the topic that would not have been anticipated by the researcher and would not have emerged from interviews with individuals” (p. 303). We also agree with Seymour, Dix, and Eardley (1995), who stated that joint interviewing reveals different kinds of knowledge held by each person and produces more complete data because interviewees fill in each other’s gaps and memory lapses.

We recognize that many scholars advocate interviewing spouses separately to encourage greater honesty and to be sensitive to issues of gender and power (see Seymour et al., 1995). Although we agree that this approach is often the best, for this study we thought it preferable for couples to be interviewed together for the following reasons: first, to allow spouses to discuss their relationship together—including their conflicts—and thus be able to remind and correct each other and complement each other’s perspectives; second, to be sensitive to diverse cultural and religious beliefs and practices regarding women’s being alone with male interviewers (as was the case for Muslim and some Orthodox Jewish couples).

Nonetheless, a limitation of this approach is that some wives and husbands may have been less than fully open about their experiences and feelings owing to issues around power and gender. To attempt to address this limitation, the interviewer encouraged wives and husbands to respond to each question and to comment on or add to each other’s response. Interviews included much interchange, correcting, challenging, and adding to spouse’s comments. Wives, more often than husbands, corrected and added to their spouses’ comments.

## Analysis

Audiotaped interviews were transcribed and checked for accuracy. A modified grounded theory approach was used (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) employing open coding (to discover major themes) and axial coding (to

collapse themes into fewer, broader categories). Grounded theory is intended to construct theory anchored in the data, not in the preconceived views of the researcher.

According to Corbin and Strauss (1990), the first phase of grounded theory is open coding when conceptual labels are given to preliminary groupings of similar occurrences. In the second phase, axial coding, as it was applied in this study, efforts were made to reconstruct or deconstruct existing links between categories and subcategories. The original list of recurring themes was narrowed through eliminating less prevalent and less salient themes and by combining closely related themes, to reduce them to a manageable number. The interviews were then revisited to make certain that they contained sufficient data to support each theme, and some were removed. Then, attempts were made to falsify emergent findings, which involves searching for negative instances (Gilgun, 2005) to attempt to prove initial conclusions false and determine whether they hold up under scrutiny. That is, once themes and initial concepts were developed, a conscious effort was made to find different or additional themes and thus challenge the initial findings. This is one way that qualitative scholars attempt to bring validity to their findings (Gilgun, 2005).

## Results

Qualitative scholars (LaRossa, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) suggest identifying a core concept that captures the essence of the study. Strauss and Corbin (1998) explain a core concept as being an abstract phrase or conceptual idea “under which all other categories can be subsumed” (p. 146). The core concept reflected in the data is that *including God in marriage enhanced and stabilized marital commitment*. Most couples mentioned that God was a significant part of their marriage. Several used the biblical metaphor of a threefold cord (“a threefold cord is not quickly broken”; see Ecclesiastes 4:12) in which God, wife, and husband create a strong bond. The threefold cord metaphor aptly captures the core concept because most couples described God’s influence in their marriage as the major religious influence on marital commitment. Including God in marriage was chosen as the core concept because it seemed to influence the other major themes.

We saw several patterns in these data that reflect how these highly religious couples perceived the connection between their religiosity and the commitment in their marriages. Analysis indicated three major themes, namely, that religious beliefs and practices helped couples (a) include God as the third cord in their marriage, (b) believe in marriage as a religious institution that

can and should last, and (c) find meaning in committing to marriage. The three major themes contained two subthemes, each of which is discussed individually. Our analysis does not attempt to represent the faith practices and beliefs of members from all sampled faith communities; rather, it depicts a summation of the activities and outcomes of all groups. We have attempted to focus on common themes among religious families in general rather than on Jews, Muslims, or separate Christian denominations per se.

### **Inclusion of God as the Third Cord in Marriage**

Couples expressed the belief that their marital commitment was stronger when God was included as the “third cord” in the marriage. Amy, an Orthodox Christian banker, said,

Two cords become united with a third cord and you are strengthened with that third cord there. I think what comes for the religion in strengthening the marriage is that there'll be ups and downs but you know you're going to get through it.

Believing that God was part of her marriage as a third cord seemed to give Amy the strength to remain committed to her spouse through the ups and downs of their marriage.

*God and the genesis of marriage.* Many of the couples said that they believed that God “brought us together” in the first place; that is, they believed that God was directly involved in their meeting and marrying their spouse. This belief increased their commitment to the marriage partner and the marriage. When discussing commitment, several of the couples referred to the initial vows that they made to each other during their wedding ceremony. These vows seemed to have lasting significance in their lives and were mentioned as helping them to maintain high levels of marital commitment because of the additional impact of including God in the marital covenant. Their vows reminded them of feeling God's presence or approval during the wedding ceremony, which contributed to the long-lasting memory of the vows.

Many of the couples perceived their wedding vows as uniting themselves to each other and to God. Thomas, a Presbyterian financial analyst, said “I believe it is a covenant. It's a three-way covenant between us and God and we believe that we're one, we're one flesh, we're one in union.” Becoming one with God seemed to carry great importance for the couples. In explaining the significance of her marital vows, Kira, a Lutheran insurance broker, expressed thoughts related to the threefold-cord metaphor:

It's a covenant. It's a covenant to each other, but more importantly it's a covenant to God. It's a threesome that holds together. You take that third out and it falls apart. So that's I think what for us has really defined our marriage.

Kira's commitment seems to have been influenced by including God in her marital vows and covenants. This idea of including God in the marital vows is one characteristic that differentiates religious ceremonies from secular weddings, and it appears to be a defining feature of religious couples' marital commitment.

Susan, a Methodist chemistry professor, described her experience of feeling God's presence during her and her husband's wedding ceremony: "It was so different than what we had imagined. It was so incredibly powerful. . . . And it was just the *love* that was there. And whatever transformation happened in the church was really, I think, a feeling of God's presence." This powerful experience seemed to leave a lasting impact on how Susan viewed her marriage.

Regardless of whether making marital vows was a transforming experience, couples seemed to recall these vows of commitment later in their marriage. As Russell, a Catholic meat cutter, said, "the ceremony, it's [always] in the back of your mind having made that commitment." Always having the wedding vows at the back of his mind seemed to help Russell and others to remain committed in marriage. Whether it was the belief that God brought them together, the impact of including God in the marital vows and covenants, the influence of experiencing God's presence during the wedding ceremony, or simply remembering the promises made during the ceremony, including God in the genesis of marriage seemed to enhance couples' marital commitment.

*Ongoing partnership with God.* Couples' perceptions of God's involvement in their marriages go far beyond their wedding ceremonies. Shawn, a Baptist university chaplain, said,

God is the center of our marriage. We desire that God would be the center of our marriage, so that our commitment to each other is an outgrowth of our commitment to Him. . . . Faithfulness, fidelity, commitment, perseverance, covenant. Our faith definitely influences those.

Shawn thought that keeping God at the center of his marriage enhanced his commitment to his wife.

Mercy, a Baptist caregiver, explained how God's ongoing influence helped she and her husband stay together: "Well, we believe He brought us together. You know, so He played a role in the start. And I don't think that we'd be together anymore if we didn't have God in the middle." Mercy

acknowledged God's important role in the initial phases of their relationship but asserted that without God's continued presence, their marriage would not have endured. Perhaps this may be partly due to an additional motivation to be committed that can stem from a relationship with God. Ed, a Seventh-day Adventist systems analyst, claimed, "Our relationship with God is our motivation to work things out." Whatever the reason may be, including God in their marriage helped couples to stay committed to each other.

### **Belief in Marriage as a Religious Institution That Can and Should Last**

Including God in their marriage seems to have enhanced couples' perception that the institution of marriage can and should be permanent. Michelle, a Christian Scientist instructional aide, said, "I think that it's impossible to separate our beliefs and the institution of marriage." Michelle directly vocalized what many couples expressed less straightforwardly—the sentiment that religion is interconnected with the institution of marriage. Many expressed their belief that the institution of marriage should not be broken by divorce. Some believed that the institution of marriage should not be broken by death but that it can continue on eternally.

*Belief that marriage should not be dissolved.* Many of the couples expressed the belief that marriage should not be dissolved. Espousing such a belief motivated several of the couples to work through the problems in their marriage, because for them, leaving the marriage was not an option. Others emphasized the security they felt in their relationship that came from knowing that divorce would not be seriously considered by their partner.

Matt, a Lutheran Coast Guard officer, also referred to the threefold-cord metaphor to explain how God's involvement in his marriage enhanced his belief in marriage as an institution that should not be dissolved.

You go to Ecclesiastes and it says that a cord of three strands is not easily broken. I think that the spiritual belief I have is that God through Christ is our example of what marriage and a family should be like. And I think that we take seriously where it says that God hates divorce, and we also take seriously where it says the two shall become one and we try to be as much as one.

Matt believes that he and his wife are united with God in a threefold cord and that God does not approve of breaking this cord through divorce.

A few of the Christian couples referred to Christ's words in Matthew 19:6: "Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined

together, let not man put asunder.” Many Christians seemed to interpret this and other passages to mean that God is displeased with divorce. In fact, Andy, a Christian and Missionary Alliance computer technician, quoted from this verse to illustrate his feelings about his marriage covenant:

Like we were saying before, what God put together, let no man put asunder. So I kind of think of our marriage as definitely a covenant to stay together and stay away from all those things that can put us apart. And so we try and keep our lives focused on God and the way that He would want us to be together and treat each other. Kind of the way He would treat us, hopefully.

Nearly all couples that marry come to have financial and relational disincentives for getting divorced. However, in addition to avoiding the typical deterrents to a breakup, many religious couples were motivated to stay together to avoid the displeasure of God because they believe that God wants them to be together. Some feared that eternal punishment would be a consequence of splitting with a spouse.

Nonetheless, most couples did not focus on disincentives such as punishment and fear but seemed to view Christ’s commandment to “let not man put [a marriage] asunder” constructively. As Matt mentioned, it helped him and his wife to “keep focused on God and the way that He would want us to be together and treat each other.” In addition, Kira, a Lutheran insurance broker, explained how excluding divorce as an option helped her and her husband to work hard at their marriage:

Well, [religion] commits you. There’s no option to be angry or bitter at each other. It forces you to work. Not work things out, but to sit down and go over things. I think it brings you closer as a result in that you need that time to resolve issues and to stay on the same page.

Making the decision not to divorce seemed to give couples an increased desire to work through the problems in their marriage.

Others expressed how their resolve to work things out rather than divorce gave them a sense of peace and security. Thomas, a Presbyterian financial analyst, said,

And the thing my relationship with God has done is that I’m not afraid that Jennifer will divorce me. I’m not afraid of that. And that gives me a lot of confidence and it allows me to be who I am and not walk on eggshells all the time.

Because both Thomas and his wife made a commitment to the institution of marriage and did not consider divorce, they experienced a peace of mind that made it easier for them to fully commit to and enjoy their relationship.

Believing that God opposes divorce seemed to increase couples' marital commitment. Several feared eternal consequences of breaking their marriage vows; others felt obligated to work through their problems because escaping them was not an option; and others felt safe committing to someone whom they could count on to return the favor.

*Belief that marriage continues after death.* Another unique aspect of religious involvement that seemed to help some of the couples to be committed to the institution of marriage was the belief that marriage continues after death. Such a belief seemed to unite couples in a common goal and motivate them to work toward such an ideal. Julie, a Latter-day Saint registered nurse, described the beliefs of her faith tradition:

Well, we believe that families are together forever and we go to the temple and are sealed to one another so that we will be together forever, and I think that that's Heavenly Father's plan to have us be together forever. . . . That's the common goal we have together, to be together forever, to keep that promise we made to each other: to be committed to each other and to be together forever.

Believing that their marriage was going to last beyond "until death do you part" seemed to unite this couple in striving to achieve this mutual objective.

Charles, an Orthodox Christian teacher, similarly believed in the eternal nature of marriage:

I guess one thing that distinguishes, perhaps, I don't know, Orthodox conception of marriage is that it's not something, it's not until death do us part. Marriage is made in heaven. . . . So our marriage is ideally an eternal thing, an eternal bond and we will be married, we will stand married on the last day.

As Charles mentioned, marriage is, ideally, an eternal relationship. Being together forever is not just something that happens but is an ideal to strive for. And presumably living happily ever after together in heaven can only be realized if both partners are completely committed to each other and to God.

## **Religiosity Provides Meaning for Committing to Marriage**

Including God in their marriage seemed to add meaning to couples' marital commitment. Jason, a Latter-day Saint religious educator, explained, "If there wasn't a belief in God or a belief in what we're doing is eternal or long-lasting, then why have a wife?" For Jason, believing that there is a higher being gave meaning to committing to a spouse. Some discussed this added meaning for committing to marriage in terms of its being a sacred purpose; others talked about this meaning in terms of the added perspective that they needed to get through difficult times.

*Religiosity provides a sacred purpose for committing to marriage.* Religiosity helped the couples in our study to perceive ongoing commitment to their marriage as a sacred purpose. Linda, a Quaker educational administrator, said, “To me that was an important part of [religion], to see marriage as a lifetime commitment, to making our lives work with one other person is really a powerful idea and a powerful calling.” Linda does not view commitment as an unpleasant obligation but as a sacred calling. Her religious participation has seemed to help her to view her commitment with purpose, as something she was motivated to fulfill.

Some couples had physical reminders of marital commitment in addition to a wedding band. For example, Tevia, a Jewish physician, discussed how the *tzit tzit*—an article of clothing that Orthodox Jewish men wear—reminded him of his marital commitment:

[It’s] sort of a T-shirt with the purpose of which is to not be led astray, or sexually be distracted. If your eyes are straying on other women, you’re supposed to look at the *tzit tzit* and remember that there’s a higher purpose and that there’s something else I’m supposed to be doing. And it’s related to my wife, of being faithful to my wife.

If Tevia was ever tempted to be unfaithful to his marital commitment, his religiosity provided him with a physical reminder of the higher purpose of his commitment to his wife. Not only did this religious garment seem to be a reminder of his commitment, but it also seemed to give meaning to being faithful to his wife and to God. Physical symbols, viewing marriage as sacred calling, and believing in a higher being gave couples meaning in committing to their marriage.

*Religion provides perspective that helps couples stay committed through difficulties.* Every long-term marriage undergoes difficult times, and some do not hold up under such trials. Those interviewed identified ways by which including God in their marriage gave them perspective to get through difficult times. Michelle, a Christian Scientist instructional aide, explained how her faith helped her to make it through such times:

We’ve been married over 19 years and sometimes your spouse drives you crazy, but you love him. And sometimes you just have to see him as God sees him. Not sometimes, all the time, actually. . . . The set of wonderful qualities that you married him for are always, and that they can never lose that, then it just helps you get over the tough spots.

Michelle's attempts to see her husband as God sees him gave her a new perspective of the kind of person that he was and seemed to help her to get past his weaknesses as she remembered those qualities that she fell in love with.

Sophie, a Presbyterian retired business owner, explained how her belief and experience of God gave her the strength to continue her relationship:

The commitment to sticking with it is definitely promoted with this belief [in the sanctity of marriage]. Through thick and thin. And my belief in God, my actual experience of God at those times is what carried me through to stick with it, to stay the course.

Something about experiencing God gave Sophie the perspective that she needed to remain committed. This type of experience was not uncommon among the couples we interviewed.

Sometimes life events occur that are not directly related to the relationship but can be hard on a marriage, such as a death in the family. Tina, a Latter-day Saint teacher, related her difficult experience:

Our fifth child was stillborn. That was difficult, that was very difficult. And if we didn't have the commitment we have, to the eternal family, I think it would have been very hard for me. It was a crazy time for me. But I think it was my commitment to Tim and our eternal commitment and our spiritual commitment to each other that helped me make it through that.

In this case, Tina was able to rely on the commitment in her marriage to help her in coping with the trauma of losing a child. The belief in God and in an eternal family gave her the perspective needed to recover from this trial and to continue loving and giving. Whether it was perceiving marriage as a sacred calling or seeing a spouse through God's eyes, including God in marriage appeared to offer the meaning, purpose, and perspective that couples needed to remain committed during good times and bad times.

## **Alternative Explanations**

There are several alternative explanations for how religiosity may influence an individual's marital commitment. One of these is an individual's faith community. Some would argue that what causes couples to stay together is the social pressure from members of a religious community to stay married rather than religious beliefs and practices. Comments made by Alvin, a Presbyterian physician, may offer some support for such a view:

Well in terms of beliefs, I think being a regular attendee of services and also other activities in the church, one gets a sense from not only a biblical tradition, but from seeing other folks about the importance of commitment and what an extraordinary value that is and how important it is to work at that . . . to be committed to each other.

Alvin admitted that “seeing other folks” had influenced his commitment. However, whereas social pressure may be an element of Alvin’s commitment, it does not seem to be a key element. In fact, few couples mentioned the influence of peer referencing on their marital commitment, which does not discount its potential influence.

Or, perhaps, the types of individuals that select into and remain involved in religious activity are simply more prone to be committed to their marriages. For instance, Efrem, a Jewish software engineer, claimed that his commitment to his wife did not stem from his religious participation:

I have a deep belief about marriage that I don’t think I got from my religiosity anywhere along the line, but that you choose the person you marry and you make it work. It’s wonderful and it’s bad sometimes and you just hang in there and you stick with it and you work it and you treasure it and you honor it and you don’t walk away. And I don’t know where I picked that up. I don’t think I picked that up from religion anywhere, but I think I had that already.

Efrem claims to have picked up his attitude about commitment from sources other than religion. Although we acknowledge that religion is not the only source of marital commitment, the commitment level of most of the couples in our study did appear to have been enhanced and stabilized through their religious beliefs and involvement.

## Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to explore the possible mechanisms of the relationship between religiosity and marital commitment. Although several sociological theories may explain this relationship, we attempted to provide an in-depth analysis at the dyadic level. Therefore, we adopted the theoretical perspective of Mahoney et al. (1999) that emphasizes religiosity as sanctifying marriage. Consequently, we chose to ask highly religious couples how they perceived their religious beliefs and practices relating to the commitment in their marriage. As in any type of research, qualitative or quantitative, the scope of our results is limited by the questions asked and by the sample selected. Because our goal was not

to explore how sociological theories such as social referencing relate to religiosity and marital commitment, we did not ask questions that may have elicited such responses. This is likely the reason that more couples did not discuss the influence of their peers on their marital commitment.

In addition, individuals who invest much of their time and resources into religious activities would probably be less inclined to discuss possible ways by which religiosity may be detrimental to their marital relationship and commitment. To address these limitations of our sample and study, we now discuss reference group theory and how it may offer an alternative explanation for the relationship between religiosity and marital commitment, followed by a discussion of possible ways by which religiosity may impede commitment in marriage. Finally, consistent with Matthews's recommendations (2005) regarding the content of discussion sections of studies that use grounded theory, we discuss the findings in the literature that relate to or confirm the findings of this study.

## Sociological Explanations

In the *Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois (1899/1996) argued that the Black church "is, to be sure, a social institution first, and religious afterwards" (p. 205). This statement emphasizes an important principle—that the sociological element of religion is fundamental in its influence on an individual, a couple, or a family. Although various sociological theories may apply to commitment in marriage, here we apply reference group theory.

Reference group theory most likely explains part of religiosity's influence on marital commitment. Reference group theory posits that attitudes and behaviors are decisively shaped by the groups in which individuals participate. People often refer to their reference groups for evaluation of their past behavior and to inform their current and future behavior (Cochran & Beeghley, 1991). Other researchers have explained that certain criteria may predict the degree to which one's peer group influences him or her. Some of these criteria include the degree of similarity between status attributes and values that a person shares with the group, the degree of clarity in a group's beliefs and values, the degree of sustained interaction that an individual maintains with a group, and the degree to which one perceives group leaders as significant others (Bock, Beeghley, & Mixon, 1983).

According to this theory, a religious community would likely be influential in an involved person's life because it engenders several of Bock et al.'s criteria (1983) for peer group influence. Although few of the couples in our study acknowledged the influence of their religious reference groups on their levels of marital commitment, peer referencing likely played an important role in helping these couples to stay together. The influence of

peer referencing on marital commitment and on other religious and family variables is an area that needs further research.

## Religious Barriers to Commitment

The nature of our sample was such that the participants focused almost entirely on their perceptions of religiosity as sanctifying their marriage. As such, the current study makes an important contribution that adds to the “benefits of marriage and religion” framework put forth by Waite and Lehrer (2003). An unfortunate consequence of such a focus is that study results do not adequately address how religiosity may become a barrier to commitment in marriage. Nonetheless, other studies provide clues that ought to be further explored by future research, as noted below.

*Religious heterogamy.* As mentioned, religious heterogamy can be detrimental to marital quality and stability (Call & Heaton, 1997; Curtis & Ellison, 2002; Ellison et al., 1999). However, it is yet unknown whether these effects come as a result of reduced commitment or some other reason, and this area needs to be explored.

*Oppressed women.* Many argue that religion is oppressive to women (e.g., Beers, 1992), and indeed, certain expressions of religiosity have been related to undesirable outcomes, including authoritarianism, abuse, and tolerance for abuse (Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman, 2004). Experiencing such outcomes would likely be related to lower levels of commitment, even in instances when the oppression may prevent a divorce or other outward signs of broken commitment.

Religiously heterogamous couples and oppressed women are only a few examples of instances in which religiosity may be a barrier to marital commitment. Future research is needed to explore the mechanisms of commitment for these and other groups to determine whether religiosity is a help or a hindrance for relational commitment. Having noted situations when religiosity may hinder commitment in marriage, we now return to a discussion of the results of the current study, in which couples perceived religiosity as sanctifying their marital commitment.

## The Sanctification of Marital Commitment

Mahoney et al. (1999) noted two distinct indexes of their “sanctification of marriage” construct: viewing marriage as having sacred qualities and

experiencing marriage as a manifestation of God. The couples in our study mentioned both factors.

*Marriage as having sacred qualities.* The couples in our study perceived their marriage as having sacred qualities, and they viewed the institution of marriage as being sacred. The wedding ceremony seemed to play a crucial role in implanting in couples' minds the sacred nature of marriage. These ceremonies appeared to take on special significance partly because of couples' belief that they made promises not only to their new partner but also to God. In fact, most perceived their new union as including God. Perhaps this is increased incentive to stay true to such vows among religious individuals because breaking a vow may disappoint not only one's spouse but also God. Violating a relationship that has sacred qualities may have temporary as well as perceived eternal consequences for a religious offender. Empirical research is needed to test this possibility.

*Manifestation of God in marriage.* As apparent in their references to God as the third cord in their marriage, the couples in our study perceived God's involvement in their marriage. Other studies confirm that many religious couples perceive this manifestation of God in their relationships. Butler and Harper (1994) found that for some religious couples, God is more involved in the marriage than any other person is. Other couples described God as a "crucial family member" (Griffith, 1986, p. 609) with whom the couple has a personal and often daily relationship (Butler & Harper, 1994). Some considered God's role to be so important in their relationship that they spoke of the marriage as belonging to God (Marks, 1986). Dollahite and Lambert (2007) found that a relationship with God created an increased desire to please him by being faithful to a spouse. They also found that a relationship with God enhanced the marital relationship.

How is God manifested in marriage? Goodman and Dollahite (2006) explored several avenues by which God may influence a marriage. They found that God may function as an example, as a source of accountability, and as a resource of help to couples. Several of the couples in our study discussed Christ as being an example of commitment and other divine attributes. Others discussed the accountability that they felt to be faithful to God and to their partner as a result of including God in their marriage. Finally, many couples found God's involvement in their marriage to be a resource of meaning that gave purpose to committing to marriage, as well as perspective to get through difficult times.

## Limitations

The sample was intentionally limited to highly religious couples in the Abrahamic faiths and may not be applicable to other religions or to less religious couples. Couples had been married an average of 21 years; research indicates that individuals married for a long time usually enjoy high levels of marital commitment. Thus, it may be that length of marriage, as much or more than religiosity, influenced the commitment level in these marriages. Also, the mean number of children in our sample was three, which is far above the national average. Again, it may be that having several children, rather than being religious, accounted for the commit level of these couples. The mean age in the sample was 48 for men and 46 for women. Perhaps these couples were more committed as a function of age, namely, the diminished prospects of finding an alternative partner. In addition, study participants were primarily middle-income, highly educated Caucasians; thus, further research is needed to explore how religiosity affects the marital commitment of lower-income couples and/or religious people of varying ethnicities.

## Summary and Conclusion

In speaking about the influence of God in marriage, several couples made reference to a biblical passage from Ecclesiastes 4:12 (“A threefold cord is not quickly broken”) to suggest that a marriage that includes God as the third cord is not easily broken. This metaphor is grounded in the data and illustrates the core finding of this study: *Including God in marriage enhances and stabilizes marital commitment.*

Including God in their marital vows and covenants seems to have enhanced the commitment level of the couples in our study. Making marital vows to their spouse and to God and continuing to perceive God as a partner in marriage added the strength of a third cord and helped couples to stay true to each other.

This initial experience of making a covenant of commitment to God and spouse, as well as an ongoing partnership with God, seemed to contribute to couples' belief that this union should not be dissolved. Perhaps because God had been included as the third cord in the marriage and was intertwined with and holding the other two cords, it seemed wrong for either spouse to break this cord. Instead, having made the decision that divorce was not an option, couples felt the need to work out their differences. The choice to keep the threefold cord intact helped many feel secure in their

relationship and willing to freely commit to their relationship. Some couples believed in the continuation of marriage even after death. They did not perceive the threefold marriage cord as aging and then snapping apart at death but as remaining bound through eternity. This belief seemed to contribute to couples' determination to remain committed to each other.

Having God as the third cord in the marriage seemed to add an element of meaning to the marriage. Believing in God seemed to give meaning to committing to a spouse or even perceiving the long-term commitment to marriage as being a powerful calling. Staying committed to a relationship takes on new meaning when couples believe in a higher being that has a plan for them to fulfill together as a couple. Most religious couples relied on God, the third cord, to prevent their marriage from snapping under pressure. Religiosity often provided the perspective that couples needed to see their spouses in a better light, to gain strength through experiencing God, and to cope with the inescapable trials of life. Couples believed that a threefold cord may resist great strain.

Having God as a third cord in their marriage seemed to enhance and stabilize couples' commitment to each other and to the institution of marriage. Including God in their marriage enhanced couples' belief in marriage as a long-lasting relationship that should not be dissolved, and it helped religious couples to find meaning in committing to a marriage, as well as perspective for sticking with it during difficult times. For the religious couples in our study, adding a third cord to their marriage allowed them to bind themselves to each other, to God, and to the institution of marriage "for better, for worse, in sickness, and in health, to love and to cherish."

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