

MICHAEL A. GOODMAN AND DAVID C. DOLLAHITE *Brigham Young University*

LOREN D. MARKS *Louisiana State University**

EMILY LAYTON *Brigham Young University***

Religious Faith and Transformational Processes in Marriage

Leading scholars of marital processes strongly recommend supplementing the current focus on marital conflict to include research on transformative processes. This qualitative study examines the connection between religion and the transformative processes of commitment and coping in marriage. The sample for this study includes 184 married couples (N = 368 individuals), making it far larger than most in-depth, qualitative interview-based studies. Participants included Christians, Jews, and Muslims with an over sampling of minorities and immigrant families living in all eight regions of the United States. For several decades studies have shown a largely positive correlation between (a) religiosity and marital commitment and (b) religiosity and (generally) positive coping, but with little explanation regarding how and why. Findings of this study indicate that there are specific religious beliefs and practices related to how these couples approach their marriages—including several that relate to the two transformative processes of commitment and coping.

270 G JSB, Provo, UT 84602 (mike_goodman@byu.edu).

*School of Social Work, 325 Huey P. Long Fieldhouse, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA 70803.

**270 G JSB, Provo, UT 84602.

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In 2007, Fincham, Stanley, and Beach published a groundbreaking article as part of a minisymposium in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, recommending supplementing the current focus in research on conflict in marriage with an additional effort to study what they termed “transformational processes” in marriage. The present article examines connections between religious involvement and the transformational processes in marriage identified by Fincham et al. *Transformational processes* refer to processes that occur in marriage relationships that do not require outside (professional) intervention. Fincham et al. stated that this ability to transform or change a relationship from within “is the heart of normal, marital self-regulation and the basis for transformative processes in marriage” (p. 278). Examples of religious transformative processes include forgiveness, commitment, sacrifice, and sanctification. Some couples use these processes to transform challenges and potentially negative situations in their relationship into opportunities for growth. As a result, these couples can “emerge more mutually trusting of each other than they were before (i.e., with a substantially enhanced view of the relationship)” (p. 287). If couples are unable to self-regulate and solve problems, divorce becomes a prevalent result. As Amato (2010) pointed out, divorce often puts people “on a downward trajectory from which they might never recover fully” (p. 1269). Understanding these processes more clearly may

provide researchers and clinicians with knowledge that can be used to reverse deterioration in marriages as well as the negative effects often associated with divorce. Fincham et al. argued that though constructs relating to conflict are important, a successful marriage is more than a marriage with little conflict. Whereas couples with happy marriages must learn to deal with conflict in healthy ways, they must also build meaningful connections that bind the marriage together in a way that a simple lack of conflict does not.

RELIGION, MARRIAGE, AND TRANSFORMATIONAL PROCESSES

Clearly, religion continues to be significant in many American marriages. According to a 2012 Pew Survey, more than 86% of married couples in America report a religious affiliation. Around 60% report that religion is important or very important to them (McCullough Hoyt, Larson, Koenig, & Thoresen, 2000). Additionally, religion is “the single most important influence in [life]” for “a substantial minority” of Americans (Miller & Thoresen, 2003, p. 25). With such evidence of salience, few would discount the need to understand the connection between religious faith and family life. In fact, there has been a substantial increase in research on religiosity and marriage over the past two decades (Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman, 2004; Mahoney, 2010). Specifically, several studies began to address the connection between religious involvement and transformational processes that have been shown to increase relationship flourishing (Carroll, Linford, Holman, & Busby, 2000; Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993; Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003). This and other research continues to show strong correlations between salient aspects of faith and family life. However, there is little research that examines and explains the religious processes that seem to influence transformation in marriage.

Proximal Approaches to Studying Religion and Marriage

Most available studies on marriage and religion have focused on distal aspects of religiosity such as church affiliation and church attendance, but some researchers have emphasized the need for further study on the more proximal

aspects of religiosity (Mahoney et al., 1999; Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001). By studying proximal aspects of religion, researchers are often able to better understand how married couples connect their religious faith to their family life. Proximal aspects of religion include such things as specific belief systems, the process of meaning making and how religion impacts such meaning making, specific religious behaviors beyond simple church attendance, as well as what specific processes couples use to make connections between religion and family life (Goodman & Dollahite, 2006; Marks, 2004; Marks & Dollahite, 2011).

Dollahite et al. (2004) also argued that these proximal (and quite literally “close to home”) aspects of religion must receive further attention if we are to develop a rich understanding of how a couple’s faith influences their family life (Marks & Dollahite, 2012). Several studies have begun to fill the void on these different aspects of religion and religious involvement (see Burr, Marks, & Day, 2012, for a review). For example, Mahoney et al. (1999) suggested the need for further understanding of sanctification in marriage. *Sanctification* refers to the perception that a relationship has sacred qualities and/or the perception that God is an active part of a relationship.

Research Questions

This study is an attempt to understand how religious faith relates to highly religious and happily married couples’ commitment to their marriage as well as their approach to coping with challenges and difficulties by focusing on the impact of more proximal aspects of religious faith and their impact on marriage. The major focus of this article is on how, for the couples studied, the proximal values of religious beliefs and religious practices relate to the transformational processes of (a) establishing commitment and (b) coping with challenges—two of the central transformational processes Fincham et al. (2007) highlighted.

Primary Constructs

The primary constructs of commitment and coping are often interconnected. As is seen below, a couple’s commitment level affects how they cope with challenges, and the way a couple copes with challenges often affects their level

of commitment to their relationship. A brief introduction to each construct helps to frame the analysis that follows.

Commitment. There are various ways to conceptualize marital commitment (Adams & Jones, 1997). For example, Stanley and Markman (1992) divided commitment into two constructs, dedication commitment and constraint commitment, whereas Johnson, Caughlin, and Huston (1999) conceptualized commitment as having three components: personal commitment, moral commitment, and structural commitment. However conceptualized, most researchers agree that commitment is a crucial component of stable marriage relationships. Some, however, argue that marital commitment is only of value when there are problems in a relationship (Murray & Holmes, 2008). Others have identified it as important not only to marital stability but also to marital quality (Clements & Swensen, 2000). In support of this view, Stanley (2005) found that marital commitment was related to better communication, greater happiness, and more constructive coping during difficulties.

Several studies have also linked religiosity with increased marital satisfaction and stability (Burr et al., 2012; Mahoney et al., 2001; Sherkat & Ellison, 1999). Additionally, some qualitative studies have examined how religious beliefs, practices, and community may affect commitment (Lambert & Dollahite, 2007; Marks, 2005; Marks, Hopkins, Nesteruk, Chaney, & Baumgartner, 2012). However, as Amato (2010) points out, the theoretical and empirical work on exactly how commitment relates to marriage is underdeveloped. Although religion seems to influence some couples' levels of commitment, there is still much that is not understood regarding the nature of the religion-to-marital commitment connection.

Coping and/or conflict. *Coping* refers to the process of working through difficulties. As Revenson, Kayser, and Bodenmann (2005) note, the construct of coping by marital couples is nuanced and involves working through the challenges of life as a "we," not just individuals. Coping is often closely related to conflict, which Fincham et al. (2007) argued has been the central paradigm of marital research. However, coping is a much broader topic because (internal) conflict is only one of the difficulties marriages experience. Several

studies have sought to understand the link between a couple's faith and coping (Brody, Stoneman, Flor, & McCrary, 1994; Ellison, Bartkowski, & Anderson, 1999). Most have shown a positive correlation between religiosity and a couple's ability to cope. However, Sherkat and Ellison (1999) found that religion could also lead to destructive coping strategies for some religious couples. Additionally, some studies indicated significantly higher levels of marital conflict and divorce in interfaith marriages, suggesting that religion operates differently in marriages across context (Curtis & Ellison, 2002; Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993). Even so, few studies have illuminated why.

Fincham et al. (2007) pointed out:

Once we focus on strengths, coping, and deeper systems of meaning, rather than conflict, we begin to ask new questions. One simple but profoundly important question is whether distressed couples invariably need external interventions such as marital education or couple therapy when they experience relationship distress. (p. 282)

Fincham et al. also stated that there are good reasons that conflict has received so much attention from researchers. Citing over a dozen studies, they demonstrated that marital conflict is associated with depression, abuse of partners, alcohol problems, poorer health, and marital distress and divorce. For these and other reasons, Sullivan and Karney (2008), among others, posit that the study of transformational processes should not totally eclipse the study of conflict in marriage. Understanding what builds and destroys relationships is essential. As discussed above, conflict management can be seen as a subcategory of coping. As a result, many responses religious couples might give for how they use their religious faith to cope with difficulties will likely also apply to handling conflict. We now turn to a discussion of research method.

METHOD

To understand the connection between religious faith and transformational processes in marriage from the perspective of those who are living it and lay the groundwork for future hypothesis testing, intensive interviewing was chosen as an appropriate methodology (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Each interview question was pretested to identify potential problems. All questions

were open ended and sought to understand the participants' reasoning and meaning behind actions and other processes that seemed to connect their faith to their marriage. Many questions had follow-up questions to further clarify and add depth to the information gathered. Every effort was made to avoid asking leading questions that would elicit specific answers (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). However, the questions presupposed a religious orientation because our purposive sample was highly religious couples, as discussed next.¹

Sampling

Consistent with Boss's (1980) suggestion that one of the best ways to learn about an issue is through the use of a sample that is prototypical of the variables of interest, a purposive sample was used (Berg, 2001; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). As is explained in the analysis section, prototypical sampling precludes generalization but is valuable in exploring potential conceptualizations of variables and processes to be investigated further in future research (Boss, 1980). A large body of previous research using random samples and rigorous quantitative methods has repeatedly and clearly demonstrated that more religious couples are more likely to stay together, to be happier, to use better problem-solving approaches, and to have less conflict, infidelity, and violence along with many other largely positive outcomes (Anderson, 2001; Mahoney, 2010). The purpose of this study is to explore the reasons why this might be true—the meanings (whys) and processes (hows) at work among religious couples. Therefore, we obtained a sample of couples characterized by relatively high levels of religiosity and with a diversity of religious affiliation, racial, and ethnic background, and from diverse regions of the country. These couples were sought in a two stage selection process where (a) religious leaders were contacted and asked to identify couples in their congregation who they felt were strong in their faith, and then (b) referred families were contacted to determine their willingness to participate. Snowball sampling was sometimes employed with groups that were somewhat more difficult to access (e.g., Orthodox Jews, Muslims).

¹The questionnaire is available upon request from the second author.

A primary concern in qualitative research is obtaining data with depth; therefore, sampling tends to be intentional and nonrandom. Interviews were conducted over a decade-long period of intensive data collection, transcription, and coding (2001–2011). Marital couples were typically interviewed together and in person.² The majority of interviews were conducted by the second or fourth author using a semistructured questionnaire. The measure was pretested and revised to avoid leading or unclear questions. Interviewers followed the questionnaire but would also further explore issues that were raised by the interviewed couples that were not addressed by a question on the questionnaire. Most interviews lasted between 1½ to 2 hours. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim and coded as explained in the analysis section.

It is important to restate that purposive samples are not generalizable without further study. However, further study can be accelerated and improved by the knowledge obtained through purposive samples. The size of this sample, 184 couples, is far larger than most in-depth, interview-based qualitative studies. The desire was not to achieve a statistically generalizable number of participants, but to reach theoretical/conceptual saturation as shared by this highly religious and happily married sample. Saturation is evident when additional new sample members are largely repeating what former sample members have already said (Lofland & Lofland, 1995).

Participants

The sample for this paper ($N = 184$ married couples; 368 individuals) was characterized by (a) religious diversity (Christians, Jews, and Muslims), (b) a high level of religious commitment (as reported by referring religious leaders and the participants themselves), (c) racial and

²Some marital researchers prefer to interview couples individually, while others prefer to conduct joint interviews. As we have explained in a recent publication, "We interviewed married couples *together* in their homes because we believed this approach provided a rich context for learning about marriage, marital interaction, and marital processes. Babbie (2004) has similarly reported that interviewing couples together often helps elicit data that would not have emerged in individual interviews" (Marks, Dollahite, & Baumgartner, 2010, p. 441).

ethnic diversity (including heavy oversampling of minority and immigrant families), (d) a wide range of socioeconomic and educational levels, and (e) geographic diversity. By extension, the conceptual saturation mentioned in the previous paragraph was sought not only within a single homogenous group but across a racially, regionally, and religiously diverse landmark sample (Dollahite & Marks, 2009).

Religion. Given that the Abrahamic (Christian, Jewish, and Muslim) faiths have some broad similarities regarding how deity is viewed (monotheistic), as well as a shared emphasis on marriage and family (Agius & Chircop, 1998), the sample was limited to these faiths. There were 133 Christian families (including Catholic, mainline Protestant, evangelical Protestant, Orthodox, and new Christian religious traditions), 31 Jewish families (including Hasidic, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed traditions), and 20 Muslim families (including Sunni and Shi'ite couples). Although members of Abrahamic religions share a belief in monotheism and the importance of family, the differences in their theological positions are sometimes profound. Their views of the nature of God, the purpose of mortal life, the exact role of family in God's plan, and the nature of the hereafter differ dramatically (Prothero, 2010). However, one characteristic that united the couples in the sample was a high level of commitment to their religious tradition. Hence they were seen as a promising sample with which to see if there were commonalities in how these couples approached the selected transformational processes—and whether those commonalities were related to specific religious beliefs or practices that may or may not be shared among the different faiths.

Race/ethnicity. Of the families, 32 were African American, 13 were Latino, 11 were Middle Eastern, 4 were East Indian, 17 were Asian American, 15 were Native American, and 1 was Pacific Islander, with the balance of the families (90) being White. Thus, slightly more than one half of the families (51%) represent an ethnic or racial minority.

Marriage and family information. Couples were typically in their mid-forties and had been married an average of 20 years. All couples had at least one child (Mean = 3.3 children).

Region of residence. The sample includes families residing in all eight regions of the United States, including New England (MA, CT), the Northwest (OR, WA), the Pacific region (CA), the Mountain West (ID), the Mid Atlantic (DE, MD, PA), the Midwest (OH, WI), the Southern Crossroads region (KS, OK), and the South (FL, LA). Sociologists have noted some significant religious and cultural differences across (and sometimes even within) regions in the United States (Silk & Walsh, 2006). With respect to region, there were some differences noted in terms of cultural context but no significant differences relating to marriage processes were observed. Additionally, more than one fourth of the sample families included one or two adult immigrants, offering not only regional but international diversity to the sample.

Analysis

Analysis followed the grounded theory approach advocated by Strauss and Corbin (1998), as well as the analytic induction approach advocated by Gilgun (2001). One important method used to ensure that the researcher supports his or her conclusions is low-inference descriptions—direct quotes from the person being interviewed to support themes reported in the results (Gehart, Ratliff, & Lyle, 2001). Analyses involved the procedures of open, axial, and selective coding as explained by Strauss and Corbin. Finally, throughout the analyses, attempts were made to find counterexamples of the emergent findings to provide balance, nuance, and deeper understanding. More confidence can be placed in these combined efforts than through a simple process of open coding alone (Gilgun, 2005). These contrasting opinions demonstrate the necessity of transcending the traditional approach of studying faith and family that depends on more distal variables (i.e., denomination) by examining more proximal issues—such as personal beliefs and home-based practices (Marks & Dollahite, 2012).

It is also important to note that qualitative analysis cannot establish cause-and-effect relationships between constructs. Findings may suggest such relationships but further study is always needed. Also, because sampling is not random but purposive, it is not possible to claim that all religious people approach marriage as the couples in this study do. This study does not seek to establish the normative marital

behavior of all highly religious people, nor does it seek to compare religious couples with nonreligious couples. The nature of the sample does not allow such comparisons. Rather, this study seeks to understand how a national but nonrandom sample of highly religious people who have been happily married for a substantial period of time explain the connections between their faith and their marital lives. Knowledge gained from prototypical samples in explorative studies such as this one allows scholars to gain deeper and richer initial understanding of how different constructs may interact, thereby enabling the development of more accurate conceptualization in future studies.

FINDINGS

Findings related to the two major concepts of commitment and coping are addressed in relation to religious beliefs and religious practices in the following order:

1. Religious beliefs and commitment
2. Religious practices and commitment
3. Religious beliefs and coping
4. Religious practices and coping

More nuanced subthemes are presented under each of these four thematic headings, along with supporting, illustrative data. We now turn to the first theme.

Theme 1: Religious Beliefs and Commitment

Several interview questions were asked to ascertain what effect, if any, religious beliefs had on each couple's marital commitment. Almost all participants held specific religious beliefs that reportedly affected their level of marital commitment. Many of these beliefs seemed to relate closely to Mahoney et al.'s (2003) notion of "sanctification" or the belief that the marital relationship has a divine or spiritual quality. More specifically, three beliefs that linked marital commitment were repeatedly mentioned and are addressed next as subthemes. These include, respectively, (a) marriage as a unique relationship, (b) God as part of the relationship, and (c) a long-term perspective. Quotations selected for this article were chosen based on their representative quality; that is, except where stated otherwise, the quotes used are representative of a concept that was repeated by many couples.

Marriage as a unique relationship. One of the foundational beliefs described by many of these couples was the idea that marriage is unique among human relationships, as it was created or defined by God. This belief was often used to explain why couples were highly committed to their marriages. Linda,³ a Quaker (Religious Society of Friends), described marriage as a lifetime commitment because "marriage is a vocation that some people are called to" by God. Hasan, a Sunni Muslim, described his belief that God entrusted the role of being a husband to him, and that his wife was a trust from God for him to care for. These couples explained that beliefs like these influenced how they approached their commitment to their marriage. Because they believed in God's interest in marriage, and that He set it apart as a special relationship, they reportedly felt more committed.

For some participants, a belief in marriage even transcended their relationship with their spouses. Understanding the central role marriage plays in many religious traditions, some of these couples spoke of their commitment not only to their spouse but to the institution of marriage itself. Lance, a Latter-day Saint, explained that for him and his wife, their commitment to marriage went beyond their relationship to each other. "We are committed to the institution I think even more than to one another." Similarly, Asalah, a Sunni Muslim, stated, "In Islam, marriage is a sacred institution.... That is why relationships outside of marriage are not permitted, to keep the entire society morally sound."

These couples viewed their marital relationship to be "set apart" or distinct from all other relationships. This usually stemmed from their belief that marriage, unlike other specific relationships, was ordained by God. For this reason, they repeatedly spoke of approaching their relationship with their spouse with the understanding that God required of them more than was required in any other relationship. They felt a duty not only to their spouse but to God to make sure that this, of all relationships, must not fail. For this reason, their commitment to the success of the relationship seemed to transcend other relationships that, though valued, were based on personal preference more than

³All study participants' names have been changed to pseudonyms.

divine direction. In fact, many of these individuals felt that their commitment to their spouse was closely, even intimately, connected to their relationship with God. Georgia, a Baptist, described her belief that “if you know God, and you made this commitment with God, then you want to be faithful, so you try to work through your problems instead of just saying, ‘To heck with it!’ You know.” Georgia’s response seems to demonstrate that this dual-pronged commitment to God and spouse was a strong motivator to remain committed to marriage even in the face of difficulties.

God as part of the relationship. Closely related to the above discussion of a sacred commitment was the belief expressed by many participants, that God is actually a part of the couple’s relationship. Past research has indicated that couples who saw God as more actively involved with their marriages perceived more benefits coming to their marriage through their religion than other highly religious people who saw God as less involved in their marriage (Goodman & Dollahite, 2006). For a large number of these couples, God was central to their marital relationship.

Several couples spoke of their marriage in terms of a triangle—with God, their spouse, and themselves—connected together through a covenant relationship. Jared, a Presbyterian, described his beliefs about marriage by affirming, “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.” Anne, a Latter-day Saint, explained that marriage is “a three way partnership with God being . . . a party to making this marriage work and to helping us through this life.” Another description was that God was evident in life through the marriage relationship. Karen, a Catholic, explained her perception and the influence it has on her commitment to her marriage, “God’s present in our marriage and [He is] a part of it that keeps us together when you want to walk away. It kind of just helps bind you together.” A similar view was described by Sandra, an Orthodox Christian, who said, “Because God’s a part of the relationship, it changes how marriage is viewed . . . because God’s living in it.” These descriptions emphasized the belief that God is manifest in a personal, intimate way through the marriage relationship, which reportedly increased the couples’ commitment

to make it work—consistent with previous conceptual and empirical work (Mahoney et al., 1999; Mahoney et al., 2003).

Although the majority of these couples saw God as part of their marital relationship, not all of these highly religious couples did. Some felt that the relationship with God was a matter of personal worship only, as Tamar, a Reformed Jewish wife, explained, “Judaism also teaches the relationship you have with God is between you and God. It’s a private thing. It’s not open.” Kurt, a Catholic, also explained that to him, God was not intimately involved with marriage in general. “I don’t think of God having created marriage, I guess. That [idea] sort of . . . throws me off a little.”

A long-term perspective. Many couples interviewed spoke about the importance of the belief, rooted in their personal religious faith, that marriage should endure and have no end. These couples felt their long-term perspective influenced their commitment to marriage. Although *forever* for some couples meant for as long as they lived, others believed that their marital relationship would last beyond this mortal life. Charles, an Orthodox Christian, explained his belief about marriage by saying,

It’s not until death do us part. Marriage is made in heaven, and it exists in heaven. I mean just as our whole life is supposed to exist 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.

Kim, a Latter-day Saint, spoke of the confidence her belief in “eternal marriage” gave her that her marriage is secure.

Well, one of the things that Russ and I were talking about just the other day is that we know that we are going to be married forever. Divorce is not an option; [even] just being married until one of us dies isn’t part of the plan. So, we know that neither one of us is going anywhere, you know, even if we are having a miserable day, or week, or month. If it comes to that, we are not worried that the other person is going to take off, and we are not worried that our marriage is falling apart.

Other couples that did not mention an eternal aspect to their religion still explained that because of their belief in how important marriage is to God, marital dissolution was not an acceptable solution to problems. This

core belief that marriage is supposed to last reportedly influenced how couples dealt with problems that may otherwise challenge their commitment. Tamar, a Jewish wife, explained, “You’ll hear us fight and you’ll hear us disagree, but you’ll never hear us talk about, ‘Well let’s divorce.’” Stacy, an Episcopalian, explained,

Well, I think that for me it just makes it more reassuring because I know that divorce is not an option, so I feel secure in my relationship with Mike. I know he’ll take care of me as Christ takes care of the church and take care of the family. I never have any doubts about that.

In contrast, a few participants expressed the opposite belief, as did Michael, a Conservative Jewish husband, who explained his belief, that “In Judaism, [marriage is] considered a life cycle event. But the emphasis isn’t quite as strong on the lifelong commitment. There’s a little bit more acceptance that somebody may change their mind down the road.” The difference in personal interpretation of religious beliefs represented here is likely influenced by many factors, including generational family tradition and faith community culture. We now turn from the theme of religious belief and commitment to religious practices and commitment.

Theme 2: Religious Practices and Commitment

There were several religious practices that these couples felt influenced their commitment levels. Two of the most salient are addressed as subthemes. These included (a) the symbolism of the marriage ceremony and (b) participating in religious worship, celebrations, and pilgrimages.

The symbolism of the marriage ceremony. One of the primary religious practices mentioned repeatedly by these couples was their actual marriage ceremony. Most participant couples were married in religious rather than secular ceremonies. They repeatedly affirmed that the events associated with their marriage ceremony strengthened their commitment to their marriage.

The importance of the ceremony often was referenced by these couples even though the marriage ceremony only happens once (and does not recur like many other religious practices). Many couples spoke of the symbolism of the ceremony and how the ceremony set the stage for their commitment in their marriage.

For example, an Orthodox Christian couple described their marriage ceremony and the symbolic crowns that are placed on the couple during the ceremony. The husband, Neal, explained this is “because they’re the king and queen of their household.” His wife Sandra then added, “and martyrs,” further explaining their belief that marriage means or represents dying to self and selfish desires and becoming a new creature in the Lord, as did Jesus Christ. These deep-rooted beliefs were a part of their original marital commitment and reportedly remain with them as a reminder of the ongoing commitment they have to each other.

Although the symbolism and tradition were different, a Quaker couple described their traditional marriage ceremony and how it continues to be important to them and their ongoing commitment. After describing the setting and ritual, Linda explained, “You’re making one simple promise that you invoke divine assistance and that the couple speaks to each other and it’s not ‘we’re promising to the priest.’” Her husband Michael added, “Right. The theological framework is that God is marrying the couple and everyone else is a witness to that, in a traditional Quaker form.” After exchanging vows, all in attendance sign the certificate as a witness of the promises made and their support of the couple. The couple brought out their marriage certificate that hangs in their dining room and showed the interviewer the 80 or so signatures from their wedding day. Although they had been married 10 years, that document continued to be a symbol of that day and a reminder of that ritual and their commitment to each other. Other participants also had their marriage certificates displayed in their homes as a tangible reminder of the commitment they made on their marriage day.

Participating in religious worship, celebrations, and pilgrimages. Many couples had a regular practice of individual and family worship in the form of prayers, singing, and attending church that they felt helped them remain committed to their marriages. Jessica, a Pentecostal, explained that:

You don’t have to stay, but when you become a Christian you look at it in a whole different way and you want to make sure that that marriage stays together. And you realize that even though there may be troubles and things that happen to you, through faith and prayer all those things can be

changed. So, you don't look at it as a thing you get out of, you look at something that you were in for the long haul. [You] stay together and that's important.

Lanny, who attends a nondenominational Christian church, stated, "The fact that we're both God-fearing and have that faith . . . going to church together as a family, it just helps maintain that stability."

Other couples described how participating in religious celebrations strengthened their marital commitment. Some couples also mentioned religious pilgrimage. Ibrahim, a Sunni Muslim, spoke of going on their first religious pilgrimage, or *hajj*, as husband and wife the year prior to the interview and the impact it has had on their marriage. He reflected,

It was such a great spiritual experience. And in *hajj*, the husband and wife do everything together. You hold hands and you do all of the things together, like going around the *Kaaba* and it just . . . a lot of different religious ceremonies, you do it together. And, you know, when you go through that spiritual experience, when you are close to each other, you begin to realize how important marriage is, and how insignificant [are] some of the things you get carried away with.

These examples are representative of many other religious practices these couples referred to that strengthened their commitment to each other. In contrast, a few participants expressed that, while they participated in such practices, they did not see them as particularly strengthening to the marriage—although many thought the practices provided other personal or familial benefits. Leah, an Orthodox Jewish wife, expressed that their participation in these activities was just for the sake of their children, "I think everything that we do as a couple has to do with the kids . . . we don't really do that much as a couple." This shows that though many couples participate in the same celebrations or religious services, those activities do not necessarily have the same influence on all who participate. We now turn from the connection between religious practices and commitment to the connection between religious beliefs and coping.

Theme 3: Religious Beliefs and Coping

Our first two themes have addressed commitment; the latter two address how religious

couples use their religious beliefs (Theme 3) and religious practices (Theme 4) to help them cope with life issues such as the death of family members, sudden and chronic health problems, financial problems, conflict, and daily life challenges. These life challenges come to all couples, and are often a crucible for many marriages.

Religious beliefs seemed to be foundational for how most of these couples and individuals framed their perceptions of life challenges. A variety of beliefs were repeatedly referred to by these couples—beliefs they felt helped them to better cope with the hardships of life. Central concepts that linked coping and religious beliefs included the following four subthemes: (a) the importance of having similar beliefs, (b) keeping a long-term perspective, (c) challenges are needed in life, and (d) challenges can bring us closer to God.

The importance of having similar beliefs. One idea that emerged repeatedly was that sharing similar belief systems and values enabled these couples to approach difficulties united. Vickie, a Latter-day Saint, spoke of the powerful influence that shared beliefs have had in their marriage. She explained,

We are more united in our marriage because we both . . . [have] the same faith and same beliefs. We see things more in the same light so we work together. We have the same values and the same goals that we're striving for in our marriage and as parents . . . I know that's been a big influence on our marriage.

Similarly, Jed, a Catholic, stated, "There [were] several years that were very hard, and I guess that is [like] any other couple, but I think one of the things that has kept us together is the fact that we are thinking on the same plane." Other couples expressed that having similar beliefs and values not only helped them resolve conflict but also minimized conflict because they agreed on the major life issues and when there was conflict, it was often limited to less important issues.

Keeping a long-term perspective. As discussed earlier, many of these couples shared their belief that their "long-term perspective" increased their commitment to their marriage. This belief, however, reportedly held additional salience and was also repeatedly mentioned as helpful in coping with difficult challenges. A belief that marriage is meant to last seemed to minimize

or at least ameliorate the day-to-day difficulties the couples experienced both by way of impact as well as number. Linda, a Latter-day Saint, explained how her commitment to their eternal marriage helped her through the crisis of a stillborn child:

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 Jonathan and our eternal commitment—and our spiritual commitment to each other, that I think helped me make it through that.

Challenges are needed in life. Another belief that framed how these couples coped with adversity was that challenges and adversity are an important part of life that provide opportunities for personal growth and that draw people nearer to God and each other. Sophie, a Presbyterian, asserted, “[Our belief in God has] given the marriage more strength, [and has] given me more strength within the marriage when we hit difficult times.” Most individuals who spoke in ways related to this theme mentioned the hand of God in orchestrating those challenges or allowing them to happen because they served a needful purpose. Thomas, a Presbyterian, said, “I believe that God orders our lives so that we wind up coming around to what he wants us to do. I think he uses crises in our lives to bring us to stronger faith.”

Other participants spoke of an opposing force that caused adversity. Although they believed this opposition and the associated challenges were also a normal and needful part of life, they attributed the source of the challenges to a contrary force and not to God. Chester, a nondenominational Christian, explained,

I know that there's a force that's working against love, peace, and harmony, when I look at my religious faith and belief. And like “in sickness and in health” . . . sometimes this world will test that for us. It has a way of testing if you mean what you said . . . You said it, but now that you're confronted with it, are you really going to live up to it? Are you going to hold [true to] your sacred vows?

The belief that adversities are not only inevitable but also often needful and purposeful, no matter

the source, helped these couples cope more effectively with the challenges they faced.

Challenges can bring people closer to God. Participant couples often seemed to engage in the process of “sanctifying” their challenges and adversity by seeing a divine purpose or reason for them. Whether or not they believed God “sent” challenges or crises, many couples believed that God actively played a role in helping them cope and deal with their challenges. We examine the practice of prayer that invites this help in the next section, but it will be helpful to first look at the belief that most couples had that God was not only willing but anxious to help them with their challenges.

Many participants described their belief that marriage (and the human experience in general) was beyond their own ability to deal with successfully. Several “knew” that they needed a higher power to help negotiate and cope with the challenges. Some participants described this as grace, as did Karen, a Catholic, who explained,

Grace is a word [we use] when we talk about sacraments. It's God's hand in things, God's helping hand, [as He's] helping you along. And so I think when you talk marriage, I don't know how people stay together without faith because it's too hard humanly, on a human level, to just keep a relationship going. So that's what I mean. You have to have something bigger than you.

Although this explanation is quite general, many participants offered specific examples of how divine help made all the difference in their lives. In speaking of raising a child with special needs, Krista, a nondenominational Christian, stated,

You can go much further than what you think you can go. You can do much more than what you think you can do. It was a challenge, but in the midst of all the ups and downs, there was still joy and there was still love. [The challenge] really did teach me a lot of things in a logical way, how life truly is, and how through all of that, you can live above your circumstances, if you truly depend upon God, [and] truly trust God for everything.

Similarly, Yuusif, an Islamic husband, described how he has felt a divine influence working out things in ways that were beyond his own capacity. He reported,

I have been up against obstacles and difficulties where I tried every possible logical thing, and I

said, you know, there's nothing more we can do. And then suddenly something changed and it was done. And right away you knew that it was not in my capacity.

Some couples spoke of how God's interventions helped them deal with conflict. Charles, an Orthodox Christian, described his experience as follows:

God does act in your lives and show you things that you see things differently. And you're given strength to do things, you're given more strength than you had before and you're given more charity and you just don't see things the same way. You see things in His light and not in your own. And that allows you to do what you have to do.

For these individuals and couples, a belief in God's enabling hand seemed to lead to a sanctified perspective of coping with challenges in their lives. We now turn from beliefs to practices.

Theme 4: Religious Practices and Coping

Couples in the sample mentioned several religious practices that helped them to cope, including (a) prayer, (b) scripture study, (c) religious rituals, and (d) seeking spiritual counsel.

Prayer. Prayer was the most frequent response when couples were asked if any religious practices helped them cope with challenges. Frank, a Catholic, explained,

Prayer certainly is helpful. I think trying to find some outlet, not only a spiritual outlet in terms of trying to realize our way and control over it, and so many factors that make things stressful.... There are things I don't directly have control over. [I am] trying to give that up, let God come in, let Him work those things out and let me realize I'm just a piece in the puzzle.

Frank described prayer as a process through which he worked through challenges and sought release from the stress of trying to do it on his own. Rebecca, a Latter-day Saint wife, explained how God not only gives perspective but actively helps based on her petitional prayers. She said,

I find that I can get very tired and cranky, but when I take time to say a prayer, or to think about spiritual things, or to go to a meeting, I think that

influence of the Holy Ghost, or the Spirit, then calms me and helps me to be patient in situations where maybe I normally wouldn't be able to.

Although nearly all of the participants spoke positively about prayer as a helpful resource in coping, a handful of participants felt differently. One couple in particular felt that petitional prayer was not helpful. Saul, a Reformed Jewish husband, explained his belief, "I mean, if all you had to do was pray and God did whatever you said, then God would be like a puppet on a string. Right?" Saul insisted that prayer was sometimes useless because you can't pray to change things that already happened and that coping has to do with doing the best we can in the situation instead of trying to change it. Although Saul was one of the only people to say petitional prayer does not lead to help, he was not alone in believing that at times we simply must do the best we can in hard situations. Several couples believed that God would not necessarily help by changing the situation, but most seemed to believe God could help one make it through.

Scripture study. Another religious practice reportedly used to cope with challenges was scripture study. Ibrahim, a Muslim, explained his view that the scriptures provide help when times are good and when times are bad,

There are times where, you know, you're not very happy with what's going on. And then you turn to Allah and you seek guidance. So it's like, always that feedback, when you're not sure of what's going on, and you're distressed, and you're looking for guidance. Whether it's marriage or any other aspect of life, the Muslims tend to look at the scripture and say, what am I supposed to do, how am I supposed to react? What has God prescribed for me under these circumstances? We try to look for guidance, so I think . . . it has effect when times are good and when times are bad.

Scripture study seemed to be a way for several participants to find specific direction in how to cope or handle challenges, and it also seemed to be a way that some participants connected with God. Georgia, a Baptist wife, explained, "I have to really get down with the Lord. I have to go search the scriptures and find a verse that relates, something for me to hold onto throughout the day."

Scripture study was also seen by some as an important practice to help with marital conflict.

Jenny, a Baptist wife, described this in general terms when she said,

Like all marriages, we have our ups and downs and our differences and disagreements, and I think being able to go back to the Word and read scripture and what scripture says about it helps. That is my roadmap for my life and for my marriage.

Many of these couples used the scriptures somewhat like many less religious couples might use self-help books. They believed that the answers to daily challenges and conflicts lay in putting into practice the principles their holy writ contains.

Repentance and forgiveness. There were several specific scriptural principles that were repeatedly mentioned in relation to overcoming conflict that couples gleaned from their scriptures. The couples from almost every faith tradition spoke of two principles in practice that helped them deal with conflict: repentance and forgiveness. Many of these couples spoke of the helpful and healing nature of these practices and the central role they played in facing and resolving conflict in marriage. Some spoke of repentance and forgiveness as situation-specific, and others spoke of it as a part of their weekly worship practices. Alvin, a Presbyterian, described the principle at work in his marriage in general terms, “I think the Christian emphasis on forgiveness has played a big role when we’re going through hard times. One can be forgiven and we can move on and that’s a very fundamental part of the Christian faith.”

Repentance and forgiveness rarely came easily to couples and individuals. Karen, a Catholic, shared her struggle to forgive, “You understand it humanly and that you’re called to do that sometimes, [but] that’s not easy and almost takes supernatural powers.” Similarly, Neal, an Orthodox Christian husband, spoke of their weekly ritual of asking forgiveness on the way to communion. He shared, “There are some weeks when I want to turn around and say, ‘No! Not this week! Sorry! No! Not after what you did this week!’” The couple laughed about this and admitted that occasionally happens in the struggle to use repentance and forgiveness to resolve conflict in their marriage.

Religious rituals. Many couples spoke of the strength, comfort, and direction they found in

religious rituals when they were faced with life challenges. Some rituals were tied to regular worship activities. Shantelle, a Latter-day Saint, spoke of the peace that came from attending the temple, a special building for rituals and worship.

When you go in [the temple], at least for me, it makes me feel more calm and I relax about the cares that I have in the world, including relationship issues. And it humbles me and makes me a little more open, I guess, to resolving issues or figuring things out together.

Frank, a Catholic, similarly explained how the rituals of his worship were a resource to him:

What the church offers in terms of those tools that God has given it to help strengthen us, [are] the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Reconciliation, those things. When I’m really in personal stress, I can think of times where [during] the most challenging times, I’ll go before God and the blessed sacrament, and just pour my heart out, and the answers flow back. So, yes, that’s where I turn.

Another coping resource for individuals and couples was family-based rituals prescribed or encouraged by their religion. Although these rituals were not used only in times of crisis, they often provided a foundation or a structure to help deal with challenges or even prevent challenges from arising. Kent, a Latter-day Saint, felt that their weekly ritual of Family Home Evening was an important part of helping his family stay organized and live more happily. He said,

Family home meeting is very important. We’ve noticed that when we don’t do that, there’s been a few times in our marriage where that slips a little bit and you can tell. A few more problems going on, things aren’t as happy as they were.

Seeking spiritual counsel. Seeking counsel from religious sources was another religious practice used to help with coping. Most commonly, participants spoke of consulting with a religious leader in their congregation. Some spoke of receiving help during specific challenges, as with Sophie, a Presbyterian, who said,

There are bleak times and there have been several in our marriage. [Even then] there truly was faith. There was a light there, even in the darkness. And sometimes it came in the form of a pastor visiting with me during that time and encouraging, listening mostly, and encouraging.

Others spoke of seeking spiritual counsel on a more regular basis, as did Sandra, an Orthodox Christian, who explained,

You're using the tools of the faith. And especially the spiritual father [religious leader]. I see my spiritual father every week. I don't go to him and say, "And then he [my husband] said . . ." but [I go to him] to have somebody. The difference between secular psychotherapy and an hour with your spiritual father is you don't get charged, you get a full hour, and you get forgiven when you're done. I mean that's kind of it in a nutshell. But he's not just a person there. He's representing God and the Holy Spirit and he has a different perception than . . . a psychotherapist.

The above statements demonstrate the power that comes from having someone who can listen and encourage, as well as someone who can provide spiritual perspective in times of adversity. These benefits were a valuable tool for coping for some of the couples in this sample.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to shed light on how religious couples may connect their religious beliefs and practices with the transformational processes of commitment and coping in marriage. For several decades, studies have shown that religiosity is associated with positive marital satisfaction, marital stability, marital commitment, a willingness to sacrifice, positive couple coping, as well as less overall conflict. However, because most studies have only looked at the distal aspects of a couple's religion such as church attendance or affiliation, the majority of studies have been hard pressed to explain the "whys" and "hows" behind these connections (Marks & Dollahite, 2011). The great sociologist of religion, Emile Durkheim (1954), stated,

The believer who has communicated with his god is not merely a man who sees new truths of which the unbeliever is ignorant; he is a man who is stronger. He feels within him more force, either to endure the trials of existence, or to conquer them. It is as though he were raised above the miseries of the world, because he is raised above his condition as a mere man. (p. 416)

What Durkheim wrote about individuals reportedly rings true for many of the couples in our study. Further, a large and growing body of

research has demonstrated that religious beliefs, practices, and communities assist couples and families to have a sense of purpose, to have a structure to their daily lives, to have spiritual and tangible resources to aid them in tough times, to have a place to serve something greater than themselves and, according to Kenda Creasy Dean (2010), to have "a creed to believe, a community to belong to, a call to live out, and a hope to hold onto" (p. 42). All this seems to help healthy religious couples to have access to resources that can help strengthen their marital commitment and their ability to cope with life's challenges.

In their newly developed "sacred theory," Burr et al. (2012) frame the sacred as ranging from profoundly beneficial to deeply destructive, depending on how religious beliefs and practices are lived out in the context of marriage and family life. This study focuses on couples that reportedly have been transformed in positive ways across time, consistent with Fincham et al.'s (2007) call for research that would begin to explore the transformational processes that enable couples to flourish and succeed. The couples that took part in this study spoke of specific religious beliefs and practices that, for them, were transformational in binding them together in a more committed relationship as well as in helping them to cope with challenges more effectively.

Due to the qualitative nature of this research, further research using different methodologies is needed to confirm (a) the specific findings regarding the reported influence of religious beliefs and practices on marital commitment and coping as well as (b) how generalizable such influences may be to different populations. Current results need to lead to quantification and examination in the context of longitudinal and intervention-based studies. This study can provide future researchers with valuable insights into measurement and conceptualization.

One implication of the views reported by couples regarding religious beliefs and commitment is that researchers may wish to examine facets of belief about marriage as a religious institution, marriage as an affirmation of religious commitments, and marriage as "eternal" in relation to the maintenance of long-term commitment in marriage. These constructs may supplement those assessing "acceptability of divorce" or "shared religious beliefs" as predictors of long-term outcomes.

Regarding religious practices and commitment, future researchers may wish to examine the possible impact of religion on relationship formation and formalization through religious rituals on commitment. Further, it could be beneficial to explore whether there are certain religious practices such as worship, prayer (personal and couple-based), and scripture study that have a greater impact on marital commitment than others. Also, are there any religious practices that may have an additive (or diminishing) effect on marital commitment in relation to specific religious beliefs?

In regards to religious beliefs and coping, future researchers could profitably explore the connection between a couple's shared beliefs and similar approaches to coping with challenges. In addition, these couples expressed the belief that because they viewed marriage as permanent, even eternal, in nature, they tended to focus on long-term rather than short-term solutions to problems. If this finding is borne out in future research, it could provide profitable avenues for future research and interventions based not only on religious beliefs but also on cultural beliefs that emphasize the permanence of marriage.

Finally, future researchers may benefit from the insights of these couples relating to what specific actions seem to contribute to a couple's increased ability to solve relational (and other) challenges and problems. These couples spoke of prayer, scripture study, and other religious practices as beneficial to their efforts to cope with challenges. If future research bears these findings out, scholars could explore what it is about these activities that seems to impact a couple's ability to cope. Are there certain types of prayer or specific topics of scripture study that have a greater effect on coping than others? Are there nonreligious behaviors that provide similar coping benefits? Though this research makes a contribution to our understanding, further research will be needed to flesh out each of the constructs addressed.

Limitations and Implications for Further Research and Practice

Although the findings of this study shed light on how highly religious, happily married couples see their religious faith impacting their marital commitment as well as how they cope, due to the nature of the sample and the nature of

qualitative research, it leaves many questions unanswered. Further research will be needed to understand how applicable the beliefs and practices reported in this study are not only to other populations but also to representative samples of the studied population. Are the beliefs and practices mentioned by these couples held by large segments of the population? Do those who are not highly religious share some secular beliefs that may in some part be equivalent to those beliefs that may affect commitment and coping? Studies also need to investigate whether the majority of religious, happily married couples attach the same importance to the processes described here. As noted earlier, due to the highly religious and relationally healthy nature of the sample, these findings do not investigate how those who are highly religious and yet may be in distressed relationships might connect their faith to their marriages, or how less-religious, happily married couples may use similar transformational processes. Clearly future qualitative as well as quantitative studies will be needed to answer many of these questions. However, these findings do provide a window through which we can begin to understand some of the processes that highly religious couples say they use to connect their faith with their marriages.

Changing long-established personal habits and relational patterns could be difficult. However, Nietzsche stated, "He who has *why* to live for can bear with almost any *how*" (as cited in Frankl, 1984, p. 97). There is much in the world's religions that can provide "whys" and other resources to those that hope to change themselves or help others change. Helping professionals such as marriage and family counselors, family life educators, and workshop facilitators who work with families can benefit from the findings of this research. This study provides information about specific ways that religious belief, practice, and community facilitate important transformations in religious couples lives.

Helping professionals who are sensitive to the ways that spiritual practices can influence relational processes are more likely to be able to draw on the full range of resources available to couples. Such professionals understand and appreciate that religious couples can draw on their beliefs, practices, and communities to make difficult changes in their relational lives that will strengthen their marriage. Such professionals may be more likely to work with religious leaders

and/or to suggest that such couples consider how they might involve faith leaders in their efforts to change.

Given the diversity of faiths, of individuals and couples, and of personal and relational challenges, we are hesitant to make specific suggestions to either professionals or clergy based on our findings. However, we do invite professionals who work with religious couples and families to consider how they might best help their clients or students to draw on their religious beliefs, practices, and communities in making meaningful and lasting changes in their lives.

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