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# Annette Mahoney

# Ken Paragment

# Nichole Murray-Swank

# Aaron Murray-Swank

# Religion and the sanctification of family relationships*

**Annette Mahoney, Ken Paragment, Aaron Murray-Swank, and Nichole Murray-Swank**

**Bowling Green State University**

*Address of corresponding author

Annette Mahoney, Ph.D.

Department of Psychology

Bowling Green, OH 43403

(419) 372-0282

amahone@bgnet.bgsu.edu

# RELIGION AND THE SANCTIFICATION OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

## ABSTRACT

Despite ample evidence that global indexes of religiousness are linked to family functioning, the mechanisms by which religion uniquely influences family dynamics are not well understood or empirically documented. To advance the scientific study of religion's role in families, we delineate how the construct of sanctification applies to marital and parent-child relationships as well as to the entire family systems according to diverse religious traditions. We define sanctification as a psychological process in which objects are perceived as having spiritual character and significance. We summarize the psychometric properties of two sets of measures that we have developed to assess the sanctification of marriage, parent-child relationships, and sexuality: Manifestation of God and Sacred Qualities scales. We hypothesize that sanctification has desirable implications for family life, supporting this assertion with empirical findings from our program of research. We also highlight the potential harm that may result from the sanctification of family relationships and discuss circumstances that may present particular risks (unavoidable challenges, violations by family members, loss, conflict, and intrapsychic and institutional barriers). Finally, we discuss future research directions to study more closely the influence of religion and sanctification on family life.

# INTRODUCTION

Ample empirical evidence documents that religion plays a salient role in family relationships (for reviews see Mahoney et al. forthcoming; Jenkins 1992; Sherkat and Ellison 1999). Unfortunately, current scientific findings are overwhelmingly based on single-item measures of the multi-faceted domain of religion. For example, Mahoney et al. (forthcoming) found that 83% of the studies published in journals in the past 20 years on religion, marriage and parenting relied on one or two items to assess family members' general religiousness (e.g., denominational affiliation, church attendance) or conservative Christian beliefs. Thus, while research clearly signals the importance of religion in family life, the critical question that Thomas and Cornwall (1990) raised a decade ago remains largely unanswered: What specifically is it about religion that matters for family life?

The scarcity of research about the unique contributions that religion makes to family functioning may lead social scientists to ignore religion or reduce its influence to generic psychosocial mechanisms (e.g., providing social support) also served by non-religious institutions and belief systems. We contend, however, that religion presents particular resources and risks for families that deserve recognition from scientists, clinicians, and clergy (Mahoney et al. forthcoming; Mahoney 2001). To advance theory and research on the unique roles of religion in family life, this paper focuses on one major construct to account for previously found links between global indexes of religiousness and family functioning. Specifically, we discuss how "sanctification" may apply to the family.

# GENERAL DEFINITION OF SANCTIFICATION

Religion is distinctive because it incorporates peoples' perceptions of the "sacred" into the search for significant goals and values (Pargament 1997; Pargament and Mahoney 2001). According to the Oxford Dictionary, the sacred refers to the holy, those things that are "set apart" from the ordinary and deserve veneration and respect. Supernatural entities (e.g., God, Christ, Buddha) and transcendental powers (e.g., Holy Spirit, karma) represent the most obvious class of sacred objects. In most religious traditions, these divine phenomena are of greatest significance, have highest priority among human pursuits, and merit adoration and awe. However, the realm of the sacred is not limited to religious teachings about metaphysical dimensions of reality; virtually any aspect of life can take on extraordinary character through its association with, or representation of, divinity (Pargament 1997; Pargament and Mahoney 2001). Many classes of objects can thus be viewed or experienced as sacred, including: material objects (crucifix, drugs), time and space (the Sabbath, churches), events and transitions (Bar Mitzvah, death), cultural products (music), people (saints), social attributes (caste, patriotism), activities (work, exercise), and, as the topic of this paper, family relationships. Indeed, part of the power of religion lies in its ability to infuse spiritual character and significance into a broad range of worldly concerns. We refer to this process as "sanctification" (Mahoney et al. 1999; Pargament and Mahoney 2001).

Our use of the word "sanctification" differs from theological meanings that vary across religious traditions. For example, from a Christian vantage point, sanctification is an inherently mysterious process through which God transforms profane objects into sacred entities. In this vein, the Catholic church holds that God converts a heterosexual relationship via the sacrament

of Holy Matrimony into a divine, eternal union that cannot be dissolved by human action (i.e., annulments are granted to marriages judged to have never actually existed; Bokenkotter 1992). In contrast, our definition of sanctification is not theological. *We define sanctification as a psychological process through which objects are perceived by people as having spiritual character and significance* (Mahoney et al. 1999; Pargament and Mahoney 2001). Thus, we conceptualize sanctification as a "psychospiritual" construct. It is spiritual because of its point of reference, the sacred. It is psychological because it: a) focuses on <u>perceptions</u> of what is sacred, and b) is studied with social scientific rather than theological methods (for more discussion see, Pargament and Mahoney 2001).

We propose that sanctification can occur in two ways. First, an individual can perceive an object as being a manifestation of one's images, beliefs, or experience of God and one's religious faith. We label this process "Manifestation of God." This form of sanctification may be more common among theistically-oriented believers from religious traditions that emphasize particular supernatural powers operating in the world (e.g., God, Holy Spirit, Buddha). Sanctification can also occur without reference to a specific deity. In this case, people perceive an object as having spiritual character and significance by attributing qualities to it that are typically associated with divine entities. These include attributes of  transcendence (e.g., holy, heavenly, miraculous), ultimate value and purpose (e.g., blessed, sacred), and timelessness (e.g., everlasting, eternal). We label this process "Sacred Qualities." Although our research has found moderately high correlations between these forms of sanctification (Mahoney et al. 1999; Murray, Pargament, and Mahoney 2000; Swank, Mahoney, and Pargament 2000), individuals could attribute sacred qualities to objects even if they do not believe in theistic beings or follow a given set of religious teachings. Thus, the two methods of sanctification differ in focus. The former process is

theistically oriented and reflects religious traditions that revere a supernatural entity. The latter

process is non-theistic and centers on attributes of divinity without reference to a specific deity.

## SANCTIFICATION AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

For many people, family relationships involve more than biological, psychological, and

social processes; people often believe these bonds tap directly into the spiritual realm. This

observation is consistent with Zimmerman's (1974) conclusion about the main Eurasian

religions, including Confucianism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity:

> They are concerned with the sanctity of family relations more than any other mundane
> subject. In other words, the most sacred or divine aspect of society is considered to be the
> family system and being religious is tantamount to being a good husband, a good wife, or
> a good parent, child or kinsman (p. 6).

In short, people often view family relationships as sacred. Although religious traditions offer

diverse prescriptive statements about what constitutes a "good" family member, a central theme

emanates from most religions. Namely, people are able to experience God or nurture their sense

of spirituality through participation in family relationships. This theme is consistent with our

conceptualization of sanctification, a process that applies to multiple levels of the family system.

*Marital relationships*. Marriage can be psychologically elevated to sacred status and

have spiritual meaning. Judeo-Christian traditions teach that traditional wedding ceremonies join

a couple not only with each other until death intervenes, but also with God in a "three-fold cord"

(Eccles 4: 9-12). According to Hindu beliefs, the marriage ritual is an important life-cycle rite,

with the subsequent marriage (and childbearing) ideally representing a temporary but essential

stage of one's spiritual evolution (Tarakeshwar 2001). After weddings, religions continue to

articulate connections between marriage and the spiritual realm. Hindu theology presents

participation in marriage is a way to enhance dharma (divine righteousness and morality;

Weightman 1985). Christian traditions teach that marriage is a sacred encounter marked by transcendental love and grace (Lauer 1985; Stanley et al. 1998), and often describe God as an active third party whose purposes are intimately connected to the relationship's development over the life span (Butler and Harper 1994; Stanley et al. 1998).

Religions also prescribe certain guidelines that, if fulfilled, validate the sacred nature of the bond. This includes rules about sexual relations, gender roles, self-sacrifice, and conflict resolution within marriage. According to many religious traditions, for example, sexual intercourse is demarcated as a holy gift meant to be "set apart" for marriage (Bullis and Harrigan 1992). Gender roles in marriage are also often viewed as reflective of the spiritual realm, although diverse theological opinions exist on this topic. Within Conservative Protestant circles, for instance, Biblical interpretations are used to support non-egalitarian and egalitarian models of domestic task-sharing (Bartkowski 1997; Ellison and Bartkowski forthcoming). Many Christian teachings also emphasize the subjugation of individual desires as an essential element of marriage (Ripley, Worthington, Bromley, and Kemper 2000). Thus, spouses are spiritually bound to remain committed to the marriage when financial, medical, or other adversities strike. Finally, religion offers couples theologically grounded guidelines for methods to handle marital conflict when it erupts (for more discussion, see Mahoney 2001).

*Parent-child relationships*. Religion can also be intertwined with perceptions of the parent-child relationship. Some adults use sacred adjectives such as "miraculous" and "divine" to describe the process of becoming and being parents (e.g., Fitzpatrick 1991), and report experiencing God in this role (e.g., Coffey 1997). The sanctification of the parent-child relationship is fostered by the meaning that many religions attach to conceiving and giving birth,

events commonly portrayed as being blessings from God and fulfilling a primary purpose of marriage. The spiritual significance of birth is highlighted by the universality of religious naming ceremonies in which God's role in the creation of a new human being is duly noted (e.g., Catholic baptisms, Protestant Christening ceremonies, Jewish circumcisions, Hindu naming ceremonies). Religion also promotes the sanctification of childrearing. For example, Judeo-Christian religions portray the burdens and pleasures of parenting as opportunities to model and deepen one's understanding of God's love, patience, and commitment, and frame the parental role as a sacred calling that requires personal sacrifices (Bartkowski and Ellison 1995; Wallace 1986). In addition, religions provide parents with theological rationales about their duty to instill certain standards of conduct in children. For instance, Judeo-Christian traditions discuss parents' responsibility to foster children's respect of authority figures, encourage prosocial child behavior (e.g., honesty, altruism) and prohibit anti-social activity (e.g., drug use, Bartkowski and Ellison 1995; Mahoney et al. forthcoming; Wilcox 1998). Finally, religion conveys the reciprocal message to offspring that their role in the parent-child relationship has spiritual significance. For instance, in Confucianism, filial piety is a cardinal virtue, ranging from lower levels (Don't Let Your Parents Starve) to higher levels (Do Nothing Which Will Bring Dishonor Upon Your Parents; Zimmerman 1974). Similarly, one of the Ten Commandments in the Torah of Jewish faith centers on the obligation to care for and respect one's parents.

***Whole family system functioning***. In addition to dyadic family relationships (i.e., marital and parent-child relationships), people can sanctify the entire unit of the "family system." Many religious traditions implicitly promote a particular family structure thought to mirror the spiritual world. In Judeo-Christian traditions, for instance, marriage ideally takes place prior to

heterosexual couples engaging in sex from whence children are born. The paradigmatic Christian whole family unit therefore consists of an adult male and female who are both the biological parents of the offspring of their sanctioned union. Religions also impart spiritual significance to the boundaries that exist across and within subsystems of the family unit. For instance, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints theology prescribes a distinct division of labor in the marital subsystem (husbands earn income outside home and wives perform childcare within home), but both spouses are explicitly invested with equal power in making decisions that affect the entire family (Hawkins et al. 2000). In contrast, theological messages about the appropriate the division of labor in the marital subsystem and the respective level of authority of spouses have over children vary across Jewish, Catholic and Protestant groups (Bahr 1982; Bartkowski 1997). Religious traditions also provide formal rituals that signify important shifts in the hierarchy of the family system during major developmental transitions in the family life cycle. When adolescence arrives, for example, Jewish Bar Mitzvah, Catholic Confirmation, and Conservative Protestant baptism rituals operate as mechanisms for adolescents to claim their right to make their own moral decisions and responsibility for their choices. Overall, religious teachings and rituals foster the perception that particular family structures, boundaries, and hierarchies possess spiritual purposes and meaning.

Finally, many religions send families messages about how sanctified family relationships should ideally operate that cut across levels of the family. Many religious traditions direct family members to care for each other with dignity and respect, make sacrifices for one another, and forgive one another for wrong-doings. Within Judaism, for example, the relationships among family members are likened to the covenant between God and the people of Israel. Individuals are expected to show each other the commitment, trust, forgiveness, and love that they show to

God and that God has shown to them. Within Christianity, relationships among family members are similarly covenantal, with bonds among family members compared to those between Christ and the Church. Confucianism stresses the individual's duty to maintain harmony in familial relationships. The degree to which people internalize these religious ideals about family life may facilitate the sanctification of family relationships.

Clearly, religious institutions offer families far more than abstract beliefs and church-based rituals disconnected from their daily lives. But key questions remain. Specifically, to what extent do people imbue family relationships with spiritual character and significance? Anecdotal evidence suggests that at least some people sanctify their family bonds. Spouses in long-term marriages cite their convictions regarding the sanctity of marriage as a reason for the success for their relationships (Kaslow and Robison 1996). One spouse put it this way: "To me, it would be like being inside a room with no air, not to have God in a marriage" (Robinson 1994: 211). Parents also appear to view parenting in a divine light. For instance, a physician who adopted five daughters from ages 9 to 15 described single parenthood as an "answer to a completely new summons to growth ..... It is a call to grow into deeper union with God in total abandonment to His Will. It is to live as the incarnated instrument of the Lord in the role of single parenthood" (Krokonko1986). Parents of children with developmental disabilities often vividly describe a spiritual dimension to their job as caretakers (e.g., Marks and Dollahite forthcoming). These intriguing glimpses into the interior world of people's perceptions of family relationships suggest that sanctification is a potentially pervasive process.

## Systematic Assessment of the Sanctification of Family Relationships

Few studies have directly assessed the degree to which people perceive their family relationships in spiritual terms (Mahoney et al. forthcoming; Mahoney 2001). To facilitate empirical inquiry about the integration of religion into family relationships, we have developed parallel measures to assess perceptions of the sanctification of marriage, parenting, and sexuality.

*Manifestation of God scales*. Table 1 lists the items we have developed to assess adults' perceptions of "Manifestation of God." in marriage. With minor variations, we have extended this scale to assess the sanctification of parenting (Swank et al. 2000) and sexuality (Murray et al. 2000). Researchers who want to apply this scale to other aspects of family life should keep four issues in mind. First, the items focus on perceptions of the manifestation of God or faith in the facet of family life under investigation. Second, the items do not ask about the positive or negative effects of God on the aspect of family life of interest (i.e., the items do not ask whether God helps or harms one's marriage, parenting or sexuality). It is important to avoid confounding the attribution of sanctification itself with any desirable or undesirable effects of the attribution. Third, the items ask about the role or experience of a supernatural deity, but do not suggest a particular type of god. That is, we believe wording items should be kept as neutral as possible with regard to images of God. Nevertheless, some items of the Manifestation of God items might be modified for non-Judeo-Christian samples. In some eastern religions, for instance, God is not conceptualized as a personified, third party who has a "will." However, we have found that the sanctification measures seem to make sense to adults who endorse "none" for religious affiliation. Fourth, the items were developed for adults. Parallel versions of the items could be developed to assess children's or adolescents' perceptions of their parents' marriage or

parenting.

***Sacred Qualities scales.*** In our initial two studies (Mahoney et al.1999; Swank et al. 2000), we used a semantic differential task to assess perceptions of Sacred Qualities. Specifically, we generated pairs of adjectives consisting of a sacred quality and its opposite (e.g., blessed-cursed; holy-unholy). To create items, the two adjectives of a given pair were placed on opposing ends of a broken horizontal line, with the label "neutral" at the mid-point and the label "very closely describes" at either end. Respondents read each pair of adjectives and indicated the point along the continuum that applied to his/her marriage or parenting. The semantic-differential method was effective to assess the sanctification of marriage and parenting. However, we have since concluded it is preferable simply to ask participants to endorse the degree to which a list of sacred qualities apply to the object under investigation. This change has three advantages. First, psychometrically, virtually all of our respondents' ratings of marriage and parenting fell somewhere on the continuum between "very closely describes" the sacred quality to "neutral." In other words, respondents rarely indicated that adjectives such as "cursed", or "unholy" applied to family constructs. Second, conceptually, we have come to believe that the perception that an object has demonic qualities represents an important construct that is orthogonal to the perception of sacred qualities. Third, pragmatically, asking respondents to rate how much a sacred adjectives apply to an object expedites the assessment task, without apparent loss of information. Table 1 lists the sacred adjectives we used in the sexuality study (Murray et al. 2000).

Conceptual debates could arise about the Sacred Qualities scale. On one hand, it is unclear how much these divine qualities capture uniquely religious attributions. Some might

argue that these qualities merely reflect generally positive characteristics (e.g., good, important). For example, higher scores of sacred qualities in marriage may reflect a positive halo effect wherein spouses who are generally more happy with their marriage have a rosier spiritual view of their relationship. On the other hand, the adjectives that we list in the category of "sacred qualities" have traditionally been employed within religious frames of reference. Furthermore, theologians could argue the sacred qualities that characterize transcendent reality are necessarily linked with other desirable attributes of life. In fact, our research suggests moderate correlations between sacred qualities and other positive adjectives. Nevertheless, when the sacred adjectives are appropriated and applied outside of a religious context, these terms could lose their essential theological meaning and therefore much of their psychological power. For instance, individuals who sanctify family relationships in purely nonthestic terms (i.e., view aspects of family as "sacred" without any linkage of those relationships to God) may experience fewer benefits or risks of sanctification than those who sanctify objects in ways directly and indirectly related to God. More empirical work is needed to establish the predictive and construct validity of peoples' perceptions of the sacred qualities of relationships.

   *Psychometric evidence.* Our first investigation on sanctification focused on the marital relationships of 97 couples who were randomly recruited from the community through childbirth records (Mahoney et al.1999). The couples who participated were no more or less religious than a nationally representative sample of two-parent families with young children with similar demographic characteristics (i.e., mostly White with some college education). Most couples viewed their marriage as having sacred qualities and believed that God is active in their marital relationship. Specifically, the Sacred Qualities scale (range 9-63; $\alpha = .87-.88$) yielded

means of 45.7 (SD = 7.6) for wives and 44.4 (SD =8.2) for husbands. The distribution of scores

indicated that most participants believed that the sacred adjectives applied their marriage to some

degree (i.e., 84% gave higher than neutral ratings). The Manifestation of God (range: 14-98; α's

= .97) scale yielded means of 71.4 ( SD = 18.9) for wives and 67.3 (SD = 19.3) for husbands.

The distribution of scores was skewed with 27% of the sample endorsing high scores between 84

to 98. An index of general religiousness from five global items (religious affiliation, church

attendance, prayer, self-rated religiousness and spirituality) was moderately correlated with

Sacred Qualities (r = .43 and .39 for wives and husbands, respectively) and strongly correlated

with Manifestation of God (r = .71 for both spouses). Moderate correlations (r = .68 and .57)

between the two forms of sanctification indicated the variables were related but not redundant.

Our second investigation focused on the sanctification of parenting based on 77 middle-

class, White mothers who were randomly recruited by phone from the community by using

childbirth records (Swank et al. 2000). These mothers were moderately religious compared with

national norms. The mean on the Sacred Qualities scale was 49.8 (SD = 7.5; range:10-70, α =

.74), and 47% of the mothers felt that the sacred adjectives describe their role at least to some

extent (i.e., average item score of 5 or above on a 7 point scale). The Manifestation of God in

parenting scale had a mean of 72.6 (SD = 20.8; range:14-98; α = .98), with 62% of mothers

providing high total scores of 70 or above. Both scales displayed convergent validity. Namely,

the Sacred Qualities and Manifestation of God scales correlated moderately with the summary

index of global religiousness (r = .43 and r = .46, respectively), and with each other (r = .52).

This indicates that the scales overlapped but were distinct.

Our third study involved perceptions of the sanctification of sexuality in marital and

premarital relationships (Murray et al. 2000). This study involved 152 unmarried college

students. One set of analyses focused on all participants' beliefs about the sanctity of sexual

intercourse between married individuals. On average, students described sexual intercourse

within marriage as having sacred qualities ($\underline{M}$ = 54.38, $\underline{SD}$ = 12.28, range 10 to 70, $\alpha$ = .90) and

agreed that sexual intercourse between married partners was a manifestation of God ($\underline{M}$ = 35.98,

$\underline{SD}$ = 12.18, range 8 to 56, $\alpha$ = .95). Convergent evidence was found for both scales with global

indices of religiousness ($\underline{r}$'s = .32 to .36). Another set of analyses focused on the subsample of 65

students who were sexually active in stable, premarital relationships. We compared students'

ratings of the sanctification of sexual intercourse in their current relationship to their ratings of

sex in a marriage. Students gave higher ratings of sanctification of sexual intercourse in marital

relationships than their own nonmarital relationships on both the Sacred Qualities and

Manifestation of God measures. This indicates that the social context of the sexual relationship

influences perceptions of the sanctification of sexual intercourse.

## DESIRABLE IMPLICATIONS OF THE SANCTIFICATION

*Individual benefits.* Family members may experience numerous psychological

benefits by believing that their family relationships hold spiritual meaning and significance. One

benefit is that individual may derive a deeper sense of meaning from family life. People who

perceive family relationships as intersecting with transcendent forces are likely to believe these

ties fulfill purposes beyond biological, psychological, or social functions. Such perceptions could

also enhance the relative satisfaction and meaning derived from family relationships compared to

other life endeavors. In addition, people may experience a greater sense of personal pleasure and

fulfillment from family relationships that are sanctified. For instance, believing that a family

relationship is a holy gift may provide people with a special sense of good fortune and joy.

Furthermore, people may feel more secure about family relationships that they imbue with sacred

qualities (e.g., blessed, holy, heavenly) as well as more confident about the future of their

relationships when God is seen as playing a central role. Within this context, marital and parent-

child relationships may somehow seem safeguarded, inherently more likely to survive internal

strife, daily pressures, outside threats, even death. Individuals may also experience less anxiety

about family relationships by relying on religious teachings about the norms, goals, and

processes one should pursue to build sanctified family relationships. Such guidelines could also

decrease ambiguity about family roles and conflict between family members (Mahoney 2001).

Finally, besides psychological benefits, the sanctification of family relationships may provide

family members with important spiritual benefits. This includes enhancing family members'

personal sense of spirituality (e.g., feeling close to God) and encouraging religious methods of

coping (e.g., seeking spiritual support, prayer). Prior research suggests these religious resources

facilitate marital and parent-child relationships (Mahoney et al. forthcoming).

*Relationship investment.* Another set of positive implications of sanctification

revolve around the possibility that family members will work harder to protect and preserve

relationships that have higher spiritual status. Avoiding the loss of sanctified family relationships

may motivate family members to invest more effort, time, and resources into these bonds.

Specifically, family members may be more willing to: a) make greater personal sacrifices for the

benefit of family relationships, b) forgive transgressions by other family members, c) accept core

personality differences between family members, d) minimize or dismiss marital or parent-child

conflicts, e) engage in benign attributional processes about conflict that short-circuit hostile

family interactions, and f) employ constructive methods to resolve disagreements. When family relationships flounder, those who sanctify these bonds may also be more willing to recognize the problems and be less defensive about change because of the high psychological and spiritual costs of losing these types of connections. In addition, people may make greater use of beneficial forms of religious coping (e.g., prayer) when faced with threats to sanctified family relationships.

*Empirical findings.* Our initial research indicates that the sanctification of a given aspect of family life relates to better functioning in that arena. In our study of marriage, the sanctification of the marital relationship was linked to several aspects of marital functioning (Mahoney et al. 1999). Most remarkably, over 42% of the variance in husbands' and wives' ratings of marital satisfaction was related to the endorsement of Sacred Qualities and about 14% was tied to higher Manifestation of God scores. Higher scores on both measures also predicted more investment in marriage, less frequent marital conflict, and greater collaboration to resolve disagreements. These associations were not accounted for by spouses' general religiousness (e.g., self-rated religiousness, spirituality, church attendance). This indicates that the sanctification of marriage represent a unique aspect of religion tied to more adaptive marital functioning.

In our study of mothers, the sanctification of parenting was linked to parenting practices (Swank et al. 2000). Specifically, mothers who reported higher levels of the sanctification of parenting reported using less verbal aggression (i.e., yelling, calling names) with their 4-to-6 year-old children. The links of the sanctification with other parenting practices differed depending on mothers' general religious orientation. For parents who had more liberal beliefs about the Bible, greater sanctification of parenting was associated with decreased use of corporal punishment. In contrast, among more Biblically conservative mothers, the level of sanctification

was unrelated to the frequency of corporal punishment. Thus, greater sanctification may

discourage the use of harsh disciplinary practices, but only for parents who have a more liberal

Christian religious orientation. In addition, greater sanctification was related to more frequent

positive parent-child interactions for mothers who endorsed conservative views of the Bible. In

contrast, the two variables were unrelated among mothers who did not hold conservative beliefs

about the Bible. Thus, among more conservative Christian mothers, the sanctification of

parenting may encourage a greater number of warm and positive parent-child exchanges.

Our study of sexuality yielded the most provocative results about the benefits of

sanctification (Murray et al. 2000). Specifically, college students who endorsed greater beliefs

about the sanctification of sexual intercourse reported more positive feelings about this sexual

activity (i.e., greater pleasure, satisfaction, and excitement with less sadness, guilt, and fear).

However, greater sanctification was also linked to greater premarital sexual activity (e.g., ever

engaging in sexual intercourse, total sexual activity beside intercourse, number of lifetime sexual

partners, and current frequency), whereas greater general religiousness was tied to lower

premarital sexual activity. Thus, depending on the value placed on premarital sex, sanctification

could be interpreted either as desirable because it is associated with greater comfort and

enjoyment of sexual activity, or as undesirable because it is linked to more risky behavior (e.g.,

greater frequency and number of partners outside of marriage).  The way that the sanctification

of sexuality function in the relationships of married individuals remains untested.

**RISKS OF THE SANCTIFICATION OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS**

To achieve a balanced theoretical model of the sanctification of family life, the potential

risks of this process should be considered. Although our preliminary empirical findings point to

adaptive functions of the sanctification of family life, our research has involved only non-distressed community or college samples. It possible that sanctification may, in some families, and under some circumstances, have added psychological or spiritual costs.

*Unavoidable challenges.* Most people who sanctify family relationships are likely to encounter unavoidable stressful life events that test their beliefs. These events include developmental transitions (e.g., child birth, onset of adolescence), common types of intra-familial conflict (e.g., co-parenting disputes), and uncontrollable crises (e.g., job layoffs). The difficulties created by these events may challenge preset notions about how sacred family relationships operate. In turn, dissonance between the reality and expectations of sanctified family relationships may trigger feelings of spiritual failure, thereby exacerbating individual and relationship maladjustment. For example, when couples who sanctify childrearing discover that their personal and marital adjustment to parenting is more difficult than they anticipated, they may feel more anxious, guilt-ridden, or upset.

People could resolve unavoidable challenges to their expectations of sanctified family relationships in adaptive and maladaptive ways. One adaptive approach to coping with threats to sanctified objects is by "marking boundaries," thereby protecting family relationships (Pargament and Mahoney 2001). This involves cognitively defining and behaviorally adhering to clear rules about what makes a family relationship sacred. For example, a father who unexpectedly resents the limits that childrearing places on his career may remind himself of the spiritual importance of the family and then become more involved in family activities. The sanctification of family relationships could, however, be linked to maladaptive forms of "marking boundaries" if family members are unable to reconcile their experience and

expectations. A common assumption about sanctified family relationships may be that such bonds are invulnerable to serious individual or interpersonal dysfunction. To quell doubts raised by contrary evidence, people may tend to adhere rigidly to preconceived rules about how sanctified relationships function and refuse to acknowledge poor adjustment during stressful periods. Such denial could exacerbate distress and block effectively problem-solving. For example, many couples discover previously unrealized clashes in their goals and priorities for family life after getting married (Stanley et al. 1998). Greater sanctification of marriage may heighten some couples' idealism about marital harmony, making it more difficult to admit and deal directly with serious conflict (see Mahoney 2001 for further discussion). Likewise, the sanctification of parenting may trigger the denial of parenting problems. For instance, people appear to have difficulty recognizing that new mothers can experience post-partum depression (Lee 1997). Those who place motherhood on a sacred pedestal may be even more reluctant to acknowledge and deal effectively with intense feelings of sadness and despair after giving birth.

   ***Violations by family members.*** As discussed earlier, religions offer prescriptive messages about "right" and "wrong" behaviors that fulfill the parameters of sacred relationships. We define "violations" as actions in which an individual knowingly breaks a rule designed to maintain the sanctification of family relationships. Such acts are condemned by religious institutions because they jeopardize the sacred status of relationships. In Judeo-Christian theology, for instance, sins or willful transgressions of the rules of moral behavior are believed to undermine human relationships, and drive a wedge between the violator and God (Tillich 1951). Such actions may carry more severe psychological consequences for both perpetrators and victims than stressful events perceived to be unavoidable or uncontrollable. Individuals who

knowingly breach a parameter of a sacred relationship may experience more anxiety, guilt, and defensiveness; their family members may experience more intense negative psychological reactions upon discovering the violation.

Of course, most religions recognize that people can stray from the ideal pathway set forth for human relationships and offer mechanisms to repair family relationships after violations occur. Rituals of purification allow people to cleanse themselves of their sins in order to heal their relationships with others and God. Pargament and Mahoney (2001) have highlighted three religious rituals that help violators cope with their transgressions and get back on the "right path": a) acknowledgment of personal transgressions (confession); b) reparations for misdeeds (repentance); and c) a "cleaning of the slate" accompanied by divine acceptance (reconciliation). Religion also encourages family members who are hurt by violations to recognize their own capacity for sin and to use religious coping methods to forgive the violator (Pargament and Rye 1998). For example, couples may use religion to help rebuild their marriage after an affair is disclosed. The spouse who had the affair could take responsibility for the violation to the relationship and stop this behavior. The other spouse could accept what has happened and avoid vengefulness, such as triangulating children against the partner or using the affair to establish a "spiritually one-up" position in the marriage (Rotz, Russell, and Wright 1993).

The sanctification of family relationships, however, may pose heightened risks for families when violations occur. One set of risks revolve around the possibility that a perpetrator's greater anxiety and defensiveness will create barriers to admitting to wrong-doing. This may exacerbate the length of time and the level of deception connected to a violation, which could intensify the distress experienced by the violator and other family members when disclosure occurs. Another set of risks involve the negative effects on other family members (i.e.,

victims). Assuming that sanctification raises the stakes of sustaining a sanctified relationship, victims may experience stronger emotional reactions (e.g., anger, grief) upon discovering that another family member has knowingly engaged in behavior that damages a family relationship(s). Realizing one's limited control to preserve family relationships that function as a connection to the spiritual realm may also trigger stronger negative cognitions about vulnerability and helplessness. In addition, because family members are likely to be motivated to protect sanctified relationship, victims may inappropriately tolerate mistreatment of themselves or other family members. A third set of risks involve the misapplication of concepts of repentance to the violator. Given that higher psychological and spiritual stakes are associated with harm to sacred relationships, family members may feel more justified in dispensing more severe consequences toward those who damage these relationships, especially if they believe such action is consistent with God's will.

*Loss*. To illustrate the potentially powerful negative effects of the irreparable loss of sanctified family relationships, we focus on divorce. We hypothesize that the loss of a previously sanctified marriage could have added emotional costs for all family members involved. To the degree that spouses or children feel responsible for the divorce, they may experience a profound sense of spiritual failure, accompanied by an heightened sense of guilt. When family members perceive themselves as victims of an unwanted divorce, they may experience a greater sense of anger and confusion. Children may be especially prone to a sense of spiritual disillusionment and resentment when parents divorce. But even in absence of bitterness, the breakdown of a sanctified marriage may trigger greater emotional distress for family members because access to the sacred dimension of life seems to be lost as well. As one woman wrote of her observations of

divorce: "Equating the union of marriage with the union with God can be devastating for people going through a divorce. If the marriage has been a metaphor for union with God, then the obvious sequel is that the divorce symbolizes separation from God. The broken relationship with spouse is experienced as broken relationship with God" (Livingston 1985:246). Divorced spouses may also reason that because they had not been able to be perfectly accepting, giving, and healing to one another in their marriage, they deserve to be cut off from the presence of God. (Livingston 1985). Similar psychological distress could emerge when parents and their children experience long period of estrangement or either party dies before the two have reconciled.

*Conflict.* In psychological terms, the sanctification of a family relationship consists of subjective perceptions. Likewise, the goals that should be pursued within sacred marital or parent-child relationships, and the processes that should be used to resolve conflict between family members are open to varying theological interpretations. Because ample room exists for family members to disagree about what is required to develop and sustain sanctified family ties, conflict could emerge between family members about these issues (Mahoney 2001). For example, married couples who disagree about the gender roles suitable for a marriage blessed by God could experience chronic conflict over this issue and have difficulty negotiating the allocation of domestic chores. We hypothesize that such disputes may be especially intense and intractable because they tap into beliefs individuals hold about the spiritual superiority of certain aspects of family relationships. The inability for family members to be flexible and transform their assumptions underlying the nature of sanctified relationships may increase maladaptive communication methods (e.g., arguing, blaming), emotional distance within dyads, and subtle or overt rejection from the family.

***Intrapsychic and Institutional Barriers.*** Finally, the sanctification of family relationships may create psychological risks for people who encounter intrapsychic or institutional barriers to viewing their intimate relationships as having spiritual meaning. The theologies of many religions imply that certain family relationships fall outside the umbrella of sacred status. For instance, parent-child relationships that evolve in households headed by single parents or gay couples contradict traditional models that envision parent-child relationships as emerging from married, heterosexual unions. When individuals become invested in intimate relationships that fail to conform to the traditionally prescribed sacred structure of a family system, they may have more difficulty imbuing these relationships with sacred qualities or believing God is present therein. They would then have less access to the psychological and spiritual resources that others derive from the sanctification of family bonds. Members of non-traditional families may also often encounter prejudice and rejection from religious institutions and communities. For instance, children who grow up in single-father households without contact with their mothers may often encounter subtle messages about the spiritually "lower-class" nature of this arrangement. This may foster a sense of alienation and anger as well as discourage belief in the sanctification of family and in institutional religion. In fact, we anticipate that formal religious organizations will be increasingly pressured to reformulate the theological parameters tied to the sanctification of the family unit because of the changes occurring in family structures (e.g., rise in blended families, single-parent households) and in modern reproductive methods (e.g., single motherhood via artificial insemination, surrogate pregnancies sponsored by heterosexual or gay couples). If this transformation fails to take place at an institutional level, individuals who find themselves unable to achieve traditional, biologically nuclear family

systems may struggle with or even relinquish the concept that family relationships are linked to the supernatural realm. This could have undesirable effect of stripping away major sources of religious motivation and resources to value and protect family bonds.

## SUMMARY AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This paper discusses two ways in which family relationships may be sanctified or perceived as having spiritual character and significance. This includes believing family relationships are imbued with sacred qualities or connected to God. Such perceptions are substantively religious in content. By studying the implications of these cognitions, social scientists can begin to understand the unique ways in which religion affects family life. Available findings indicate that sanctification is associated with more adaptive functioning in marital and parent-child relationships. This is consistent with ample prior research linking global indices of greater religiousness to desirable family dynamics (Mahoney et al. forthcoming; Jenkins 1992). Several lines of additional research are needed to substantiate the power of sanctification.

First, with the exception of parents of children with developmental disorders (e.g., Dollahite this volume), virtually no empirical research has been conducted on the influence of religion on families who are dealing with stressful life events (Mahoney et al. forthcoming). Although sanctification appears to be a protective factor in non-distressed samples, sanctification should be evaluated in families who are struggling with significant pressures that may challenge religious beliefs. Evidence that sanctification enhances adaptive coping or exacerbates maladaptive responses when people face serious family difficulties would underscore the unique contribution that religion makes to family functioning. To detect the potentially unique risks of

sanctification, research is also needed about families who do not conform to conventional parameters that religions promote about family systems. Second, future research should include measures of global religiousness when studying the sanctification in family life. This will provide additional evidence that this construct predicts family variables beyond global religiousness (e.g., church attendance) and underscore the unique contribution that substantively religious beliefs make to family functioning. Third, attention should be paid to where the sanctification of family relationships fits into the broader nomological net of religious beliefs and practices. It is unclear whether viewing family relationships as having sacred qualities would impact family functioning if these perceptions were devoid of a theological frame of reference and completely disconnected from faith in a transcendent reality that is larger than the family itself. In such a case, family relationships may effectively replace supernatural powers (e.g., God, karma) as the ultimate sacred reality. Religions have traditionally framed this orientation toward any object as idolatry and have discouraged believers from confusing the glorification of specific objects with Divinity itself. Empirically, however, it is unknown whether the sanctification must be tied to a broader religious belief system for beneficial effects to be found.

In closing, the study of the sanctification of family relationships represents an important shift in direction for the scientific study of religion. Traditionally, many social scientists studying family life have equated individuals' religion with theology, church attendance, and formal prayer. But religion is far more than abstract religious beliefs and rituals practices disconnected from the activities of daily life. In the religions of the world, people can find ultimate values and goals that lend meaning when searching for direction about intimate family relationships. Religion is, in fact, very much concerned with the interface between the sacred and the secular. Social scientists have much to learn about this intersection. The study of the sanctification, the

process through which family relationships are made sacred, represents one especially promising

way to gain greater understanding about this place where heaven meets earth.

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Table 1. Samples of the Manifestation of God and Sacred Qualities Scales

| Manifestation of God in Marriage Scale[1]<br>(Mahoney et al. 1999) | Sacred Qualities Scale in Sexuality[2]<br>(Murray et al. 2000) |
|---|---|
| God played a role in the development of my marriage. | Holy |
| God is present in my marriage. | Inspiring |
| My marriage is a reflection of God's will. | Blessed |
| My marriage is an expression of my spirituality or religiousness. | Sacred |
| My marriage is symbolic of God and what I believe about God. | Awesome |
| God is part of my marriage. | Heavenly |
| My marriage is consistent with my spiritual or religious identity. | Spiritual |
| I experience God through my marriage. | Religious |
| My marriage reflects my image of what God wants for me. | Mysterious |
| My marriage is influenced by God's actions in our lives. | Miraculous |
| My marriage is a holy bond. | |
| My marriage represents God's presence in my life. | |
| My marriage follows the Bible and what it teaches. | |
| My marriage follows the teachings of my church. | |

Note: [1] Directions: Please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements; a 1-7 Likert Scale was used with anchors of "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree," and "neutral" at midpoint. [2] Directions: Indicate the degree to which each adjective described your relationship; a 1-7 Likert Scale was used with anchors of "does not describe at all" and "very closely describes," and "neutral" at midpoint.