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**Bowling Green State University**

***Working Paper Series 02-01***

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Religion and conflict in family relationships.

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Manuscript as of February 25, 2002 for Journal of Social Issues

### **Abstract**

This paper discusses ways in which religion may substantively influence the manifestation and resolution of conflict in marital and parent-child relationships. Religious systems of meaning are proposed to influence marital and parent-child conflict by promoting certain guidelines about the desirable goals that should be sought in family life and about the appropriate means to achieve these goals. Family conflict could be amplified or inhibited based on the degree to which family members differ in their interpretations of religiously-based guidelines about the parameters of marital and parent-child relationships. Religious systems of meaning are also hypothesized to offer families strategies that may facilitate or hinder the resolution of conflict after it erupts. The paucity of empirical research that directly investigates the salience of religion in shaping the manifestation and resolution of family conflicts is highlighted, and suggestions are made to advance future research and clinical practice regarding conflictual family interactions.

## **Religion and conflict in marital and parent-child relationships**

Despite expectations that the increasing secularization of human societies over the past century would diminish the impact of religion on family life (Sherkat & Ellison, 1999), studies conducted during the past 20 years clearly indicate that religion is a salient factor involved in marriage and parenting (for reviews see Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar, & Swank, 2001; Sherkat, & Ellison, 1999; Wittberg, 1999). Although ample empirical evidence connects religion to contemporary family life, most findings on religion and the functioning of marital or parent-child relationships involve global and/or single-item indices, such as an affiliation with a religious organization, church attendance, and personal religiousness (e.g., frequency of prayer; Mahoney et al., 2001; Jenkins, 1992). This leaves open many unexplored questions about specific processes that tie religion to family interaction patterns. The purpose of this paper is to discuss mechanisms by which religion may substantively facilitate or inhibit conflict in marital and parent-child relationships, along with related empirical findings. First, the conceptual underpinnings of the paper are presented. Second, the potential influence of religion on the occurrence of marital conflict is described, followed by a description of how religion may be tied to conflict resolution in marriage. Next, the relation between religion and parent-child conflict is delineated, followed by a discussion of conflict resolution strategies in a family-developmental context. Finally, recommendations for social scientists and practitioners are discussed.

### **Conceptual Underpinnings regarding Substantive Roles of Religion in Family Conflict**

To delineate the potential roles of religion in family conflict, key definitions and conceptual assumptions need to be established. First, interpersonal conflict can be defined broadly as an incompatibility between individuals or groups about the selection and pursuit of goals (Fincham & Bradbury, 1991). Thus, conflict occurs when people disagree about which

goals are most appropriate to pursue or about what methods should be used to achieve goals (Fisher, 2000). Applied to families, conflict can occur in marital or parent-child relationships about virtually any topic involved in planning and carrying out a shared life. The first critical conceptual assumption made here is that religion is relevant to conflicts that families experience because religion offers people guidelines about the appropriate goals pertaining to family life and how to reach them. In turn, the frequency and intensity of conflictual interactions may be exacerbated due to incompatible religiously-based views about the selection and pursuit of goals embedded in marital and parent-child relationships. Alternatively, religion may buffer family members from conflict by providing them with a common set of core guidelines that are rooted in a religious system of meaning. Thus, although world religions do not typically encourage family members to have conflicts, underlying (dis)similarities between family members' religious views of family life could influence the frequency and severity of intrafamilial conflict on a wide range of topics.

Conflict resolution strategies are defined as the strategies people use to cope with interpersonal conflict after it emerges (Kerig, 1996). In marital relationships, partners may use adaptive (e.g., reflective listening, collaboration, compromise) or maladaptive (e.g., avoidance, stone-walling, verbal aggression, physical violence; Kerig, 1996) methods to deal with conflict. When conflict occurs in parent-child relationships, the developmental status of the child shapes parents' methods of conflict resolution. When children are younger, parents tend to rely more on the assertion of parental authority (e.g., dispensing punishment, setting limits, providing close supervision) to curb parent-child conflict over unacceptable child behavior (Collins, Harris, & Susman, 1995). As children approach adolescence, parents are challenged to shift increasingly toward negotiation and egalitarianism to deal with parent-child clashes (Holmbeck, Paikoff &

Brooks-Gunn, 1995). The second key premise of this paper is that religiously grounded beliefs and practices could positively or negatively influence the resolution of conflict between family members. In other words, religiously-based views about what constitutes desirable interpersonal processes in marriage and parent-child relationships may shape how family members cope with marital or parent-child conflicts after they arise.

The third key premise underlying this paper is that religion offers people theologically grounded systems of meaning that can shape the manifestation and resolution of family conflict in unique ways. Religion is unique because it incorporates peoples' perceptions of the "sacred" into both the goals and pathways people pursue in life (Pargament, Murray, & Magyar, in this volume; Pargament & Mahoney, 2002). Although different terms are used by people from different religions to denote the sacred realm (e.g., God, Higher Power, Christ, karma), religious teachings and practices provide family members with substantive guidelines about desirable parameters of family life, grounded in rituals and myths that are tightly interwoven with convictions about transcendental phenomenon. This paper focuses on the substantive mechanisms through which religion, by offering systems of meaning that revolve around what is perceived to be sacred, may influence family conflicts and their resolutions. In other words, the paper describes mechanisms that tap directly into peoples' religious cognitions and beliefs. Readers are referred elsewhere for discussions of the influence of religion on family functioning through more general psychological and sociological mechanisms, which are largely independent of the theological content of religion (Curtis & Alison, in press; Mahoney et al., 2001).

To shed light on the unique power of religion, this paper highlights two categories of substantive messages found in religious world views. One category of substantive messages involves constructs emphasized by religions that may also be promoted by non-religious systems

of meaning, but for different reasons. The key issue involves the fact that religious systems of meaning offer people theological rationales and justifications for interpersonal goals and processes. For example, the proposition that it is a good idea for couples to strive to be highly committed to their marriage is not unique to religion; purely psychological or "secular" models of marriage likewise endorse the construct of commitment (e.g., Beck, 1988; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 1994). Nevertheless, the substantive content of religions may affect the meaning that family members attribute to certain objectives by placing them in a spiritual context. Thus, when a familial conflict emerges over a certain topic, religion could exacerbate the dispute due to the surplus spiritual meaning that family members attach to the issue. Alternatively, religion could greatly ameliorate conflict about a given topic because family members share deeply held religious convictions on the issue.

Another category of substantive messages emphasized by religion involves constructs that are specific to the domain of religion. As will be elaborated, religious systems of meaning articulate interpersonal goals and processes that pertain directly to transcendental phenomenon and are not recognized within non-religious frames of reference. For example, from a spiritual perspective, a central goal of family relationships may be for family members to be a conduit of transcendent love and God's presence. Unlike secular systems of meaning, divine entities can also be psychologically incorporated into dyadic family relationships as an active, personified "third party." Because religion offers distinctive purposes and processes for family relationships not located within secular systems of meaning, religion presents unique issues for family members to agree or clash over, and unique methods to resolve conflict.

The fourth premise of this paper is that both social scientists and practitioners should carefully consider substantive messages propagated by various religions on the interplay

between the spiritual realm and family relations because such messages may powerfully affect the content and frequency of conflictual family interactions and their resolutions. That is, the degree of (dis)similarity between family members about their religiously based views about family functioning could facilitate or exacerbate the manifestation and resolution of conflict within families. To illustrate these points, this paper will focus on some common messages found in Western religions about the objectives and processes that should be embedded in marital and parent-child relationships. Although this paper cannot exhaustively review the diverse theological perspectives that exist on family life across the globe, it is hoped that drawing attention to the particular dimension of life that religion deals with - namely perceptions of the sacred - will help researchers uncover religion's continued salience in contemporary family life and highlight important applied implications for practitioners and policy makers.

### **Religion as an Influence on the Manifestation of Marital Conflict**

**Substantive Messages that Overlap with Secular Discourse** Religious systems of meaning routinely delineate theologically-based guidelines for fundamental aspects of marriage. One category of guidelines involve values that may be discussed within non-religious systems of meaning but which, for many people, are intimately integrated with religious beliefs. For example, common substantive themes embedded in Judeo-Christian religious literature and tradition about the appropriate goals of marriage include an emphasis on marriage as a lifelong commitment; expectations that partners love, help, and comfort one another; the subjugation of individual desires to the marriage; obligations not to abandon one's spouse if major external stressors occur (e.g., major illness or financial problems); the value of sexual fidelity and heterosexuality; the importance of procreation and raising children; and the proper balance of gender roles in and out of the home (Bartkowski, 1997; Giblin, 1993; Lauer, 1985; Wittberg,



1999). Martial conflict could occur, or be intensified, based on the degree to which partners differ in their religiously-based interpretations of these issues as well as when one partner violates a presumably shared religious value (e.g., extramarital affairs). Conversely, the extent to which couples adhere to similar religious views of the above goals, and their relative priority over other purposes of marriage, may facilitate harmony.

**Substantive Messages Unique to Religious Worldviews.** The most central substantive message that religion conveys about marriage is the spiritual nature of the relationship itself (Giblin, 1993). Spiritual objectives of marriage involve destinations that fall outside the purview of secular systems of meaning. In traditional and liberal Christian circles alike, for instance, marriage is viewed as a sacred encounter in which transcendental love and grace is experienced (Lauer, 1986; Stanley, Trathen, McCain, & Bryan, 1998). Alternatively, Christians often describe God as a third person in the marriage, a personified being whose purposes are intimately connected to marriage and its developmental history (Butler & Harper, 1994; Stanley et al., 1998). Recent research on a sample of 97 couples, who mirrored the religious diversity of U.S. couples, confirmed that the construct of "sanctification" applies to marriage. That is, marriage is often perceived as having spiritual significance and character, with married persons commonly ascribing sacred, divine qualities to their marriage and reporting the belief that God is manifested in their marriage (Mahoney et al., 1999). Three mechanisms may operate within marriages to create and perpetuate such beliefs: a) use of religiously oriented language and dialect in daily conversation, b) annual and daily religious rituals or ceremonies, and c) narrative reiterations of family history that involve spiritual themes (Butler & Harper, 1984).

Discrepancies in spouses' cognitive or behavioral attempts to integrate spirituality into their marriage may represent uniquely religious impetus of marital conflict. Furthermore, clashes

on any topic may carry surplus meaning for couples who view their marriage as a means by which they “touch the Divine” (Lauer, 1985). If spouses deeply believe that a primary purpose of a genuine and authentically loving marriage is to discover what God is (Lauer, 1985), then chronic conflict could carry added psychological threat of losing a connection to God as well as losing one's partner. Accordingly, religious belief systems could exacerbate conflict by heightening feelings of fear, anger, shame and guilt, particularly if one spouse engages in behavior that clearly violates religious precepts held dear by one or both parties (e.g., engaging in extramarital affairs or homosexuality). On the other hand, couples' level of unity about the spiritual purposes of marriage may also mediate their level of agreement or ability to accept differences about other key aspects of marriage (e.g., sexuality, gender roles, childrearing). Also, the added psychological threat of losing a connection to God, as discussed above, may help motivate couples to acknowledge and resolve problems.

Religion also presents couples with unique opportunities for conflict regarding each partner's expression of his or her personal spirituality. In other words, couples may experience clashes about how to integrate the "sacred" into aspects of life other than marriage, including: a) each partner's pursuit of a connection with the "sacred" itself (e.g., opposing images of God or unequal desires to participate in organized religion), and b) other roles or activities that may be sanctified by one partner but not the other (e.g., childrearing; charity work; vocational goals; artistic, literary or athletic pursuits; material wealth).

**Empirical Findings.** Several sources of empirical evidence indirectly suggest that religion influences couples' views of the purposes of marriage and therefore could influence the degree to which partners disagree/agree on certain topics. For example, members of "conservative," "moderate," and "liberal" subcultures in Christianity report different attitudes

about gender roles, abortion, homosexuality, and extramarital relationships (Gay, Ellison & Powers, 1996). Denominational affiliation and/or degree of Christian conservatism are also tied to views on women's labor force participation (e.g., Sherkat, 2000), domestic power arrangements and household labor allocation (e.g., Ellison & Barkowski, in press), and fertility rates (e.g., Mosher, Williams, & Johnson, 1992). Greater religious devoutness also predicts an avowed preference for a "convental" model of marriage that emphasizes individual sacrifice for the marriage and absolute commitment to marriage, rather than a "contractual" model of marriage marked by individuals' needs taking primacy over the marital bond and an emphasis on negotiation and mutual agreement (Ripley, Worthington, and Bromley, 2000). The most direct evidence that religion influences couples' views of marriage is that generally more religious individuals are more likely to view their marriage as having spiritual qualities (e.g., blessed, holy) and to perceive God as being manifested in their marriage (Mahoney et al., 1999).

Questions remain, however, as to whether religiously-based attitudes pertinent to marriage actually trigger or buffer couples from conflict. Studies that link religious heterogeneity between partners (i.e., dissimilar religious affiliation, beliefs, and practices) to somewhat higher divorce rates and lower marital satisfaction imply that religiously-based differences between couples heighten conflictual interactions (for review see Mahoney et al., 2001). Further, couples in mixed-faith marriages report more frequent disagreements than same-faith couples (Curtis & Ellison, in press) as do couples who less often engage in religious activities together (Mahoney et al., 1999). Only one study to date has directly addressed whether disparities between couples' religious views, specifically about the inerrancy and authority of the Bible, generates greater conflict about particular issues (Curtis & Ellison, in press). Couples report arguing more frequently about how they spend time and about in-laws when the wife holds much more

conservative Christian beliefs than her husband, whereas more childrearing disputes arise for couples in which the husband is more conservative than his wife. Discrepancies about the Bible in either direction are linked to more frequent conflicts about housework and money. Thus, conservative Christian views on the Bible in general, not necessarily about marriage, appear to impact the frequency and nature of conflict for couples who do not share this perspective. Comparable research on disparities about non-Christian or non-conservative religious orientations and couples' religious views specifically about marriage does not appear to exist.

While the above research suggests that religion may impact the manifestation of marital conflict, the psychological mechanisms that account for these links are unclear. Reliance on global, single-item measures to assess religiousness (e.g., type of denomination, frequency of attendance) obscures whether religion represents a distinct well-spring of marital conflict (or harmony) between partners, or merely signals incompatibilities that have little to do with the substance of religion. To clarify the significance of religion, social scientists need to ask couples direct and in-depth questions about the extent to which each partner embraces messages embedded in various religious systems about the goals of marriage, whether behavioral practices (e.g., religious rituals) reinforce these values, and whether religiously-based (dis)similarity about specific aspects of marriage generate (dis)agreements. For example, couples' religiously-based views on gender roles in marriage deserve far more careful scrutiny. Even spouses who both belong to a Conservative Protestant denomination can hold strikingly different views on marriage since non-egalitarian and egalitarian models of domestic task-sharing can be strongly argued based on interpretations of Biblical scriptures (Bartkowski, 1997; Ellison & Bartkowski, in press). A thorough understanding of the role that religion plays in marital conflict around the world requires that researchers devise methods to capture the diversity and range of messages

that religion holds for many important aspects of marriage.

### **Religion as an Influence on Conflict Resolution Processes in Marriage.**

**Substantive Messages that Overlap with Secular Discourse** Religious systems of meaning include a variety of prescriptive messages about the strategies that couples should use to resolve disputes. Various religious teachings can be construed to encourage adaptive or maladaptive methods of conflict resolution (Mahoney et al., 2001). For instance, Judeo-Christian literature encourages individuals who encounter marital conflict to engage in self-scrutiny, acknowledge mistakes, relinquish fears of rejection and disclose vulnerabilities, forgive transgressions, inhibit expressions of anger, and be patient, loving and kind (Giblin, 1993; Stanley et al., 1998). Adherence to such ideals is likely to facilitate adaptive communication methods that secular models of marriage promote (e.g., empathic listening, compromise, acceptance). On the other hand, the patriarchal structure of many Judeo-Christian traditions, and messages of gender-based inequalities that result therefrom, have been implicated as possible contributors to maladaptive conflict resolution methods. For instance, a justification of an imbalance of power and control between spouses in conservative Christian groups has frequently been hypothesized to promote husbands' use of physical aggression toward wives (Bartkowski, 1997).

**Empirical findings.** Remarkably few studies have directly investigated links between religion and the types of strategies that couples use to deal with marital conflict (Jenkins, 1992; Mahoney et al., 2001). Greater religiousness has not been associated with greater maladaptive communication between partners (e.g., yelling, stonewalling) in the five relevant studies published in the past two decades, including two studies comparing Fundamentalist Protestants couples to non-Fundamentalist couples (for review, see Mahoney et al., 2001). To the contrary,

couples' reports of engaging in more joint religious activities and perceiving marriage as having spiritual meaning are linked with greater self-reported collaboration during disagreements (Mahoney et al., 1999). Also, couples' higher ratings of general religiousness predict more adaptive communication patterns based on rigorous observations of couples' behavior during video-taped family interactions (Brody, Stoneman, Flor & McCrary, 1994). In three of the four quantitative studies that have systematically addressed whether religion promotes or discourages domestic violence, greater church attendance has been associated with lower, not higher, rates of marital physical aggression (Brinkeroff, Grandin, & Lupri, 1992; Fergusson et al., 1986; Ellison, Bartkowski, & Anderson, 1999; Ellison & Anderson, 2001). This protective effect of religion persists after controlling for other psychosocial mediators, including social support, alcohol/substance abuse, low self-esteem and depression (Ellison & Anderson, 2001).

Overall, greater involvement in religion appears to dissuade individuals from resorting to maladaptive methods to resolve marital disputes. However, with the exception of Mahoney et al. (1999), the available research relies on one or two items to assess the role of religion in marriage. Clearly, social scientists should develop a better understanding of how religious systems of meaning shape the strategies that couples select to cope with marital conflict. For example, do couples with stronger religious convictions about the sanctity of marriage rely more often on communication processes that researchers have found to be protective of marriages (e.g., empathic listening, compromise, acceptance) and bypass those that intensify distress (e.g., verbal coercion, stalemating, avoidance; Fincham & Bradbury, 1991; Stanley et al., 1998)? Are such choices moderated by the nature of the goals that couples fight over? Potentially irreconcilable religious views about the purposes of marital life could heighten the use of maladaptive strategies. For example, what happens if one spouse believes an unplanned pregnancy is a gift

from God, whereas the other spouse wants to terminate the pregnancy?

**Substantive Messages Unique to Religious Worldviews.** While religion may operate as an impetus for couples to adopt adaptive communication processes recommended by secular marital experts (e.g., Stanley et al., 1998), religion also offers couples unique strategies to deal with marital conflict which deserve consideration by psychologists. Most notably, several scholars have discussed how couples may triangulate God into the marital system when conflict emerges (Butler & Harper 1994; Giblin, 1993; Pattison, 1982; Rotz, Russell, & Wright, 1993). Using a Bowenian and structural family systems approach, for example, Butler and Harper (1994) present an insightful delineation of how couples' interpretations of God's role as a third person in the marriage could be a powerful mechanism to help resolve or exacerbate conflict. In the former case, God would be viewed as: a) being intensely interested in maintaining a compassionate relationship with each spouse, b) taking a neutral stance about each partner's "side" of the story, and c) insisting that each partner take responsibility for change in the relationship instead of blaming the other. Couples who view God in this way may be more able to disengage emotionally from counterproductive communication patterns (e.g., blaming, stonewalling, passive-aggressiveness) and explore options for compromise or healthy acceptance of one another. However, God could also be psychologically drawn into one of three counterproductive triangles that block resolution of marital conflict: coalition (e.g., God takes one partner's side), displacement (e.g., adversity is God's fault), or substitutive (i.e., partners' seek intimacy and support from God but avoid dealing directly with the conflict). Antidotal case examples (e.g., Giblin, 1993; Pattison, 1982; Rotz et al., 1993) and qualitative studies of marriage (e.g., Butler, Gardner, & Bird, 1998; Kaslow & Robison, 1996) highlight the power a

and saliency of these processes. Couples may also rely on other forms of religious coping (Pargament, 1997) to deal with marital conflict, including intervention from religious community (e.g., pastoral counseling), benevolent reappraisals of conflict (e.g., viewing personal risks or pain involved addressing conflict as a part of a spiritual journey), and religious rituals (e.g., forgiveness and reconciliation ceremonies). Empirical studies about the pervasiveness and effect of religious methods to deal with marital conflict have yet to be conducted.

### **Religion as an Influence on the Manifestation of Parent-Child Relationship Conflict**

**Substantive Messages that Overlap with Secular Discourse.** Many families may turn to religion for guidelines about the appropriate parameters of parent-child relationships. One set of issues involve parents' views regarding the standards of conduct they should instill in their children. For instance, Judeo-Christian traditions discuss, to varying degrees, parents' spiritual duty to achieve certain socialization goals, such as fostering a sense of respect and obedience toward authority figures; encouraging self-discipline and self-esteem; imparting prosocial values (e.g., honesty, altruism); and prohibiting anti-social behavior (e.g., drug or alcohol use, delinquency; Bartkowski & Ellison, 1995; Mahoney et al., 2001; Wilcox, 1998). Religion also addresses whether mothers and fathers should perform different parental roles in the family as a function of gender (Bartkowski & Xu, 2000; Hawkins et al., 2000). Finally, religion frames the parental role as a sacred calling, which requires personal sacrifice and making family life a central priority of life (e.g., Bartkowski, & Ellison, 1995; Marks & Dollahite, in press). The degree to which parents adopt (dis)similar religiously-based views about appropriate socialization goals for children and parental responsibilities may shape the nature and frequency of conflict within families. Failures of parents or children to adhere to religiously-based expectations of their roles could become potent sources of discord in family relationships,



whereas consensus about such issues could foster family unity and cohesion.

**Substantive Messages Unique to Religious Worldviews.** Besides framing mothers' and fathers' respective roles to socialize children as a spiritual mission, religion imparts spiritual meaning to other aspects of the parent-child relationship. Thus, like marriage, parent-child relationships can serve unique religious purposes. For example, many religions encourage parents to view children themselves as divine, holy gifts to be treasured. In turn, parents are expected to foster their children's connection to the divine and facilitate the development of their spirituality and religious identity (Wallace, 1996). Religion also portrays the burdens and pleasures of parenting as opportunities to model and deepen one's own understanding of God's love, patience, and commitment (Abbot, Berry, & Meredith, 1990). Finally, many religions argue that certain family structures fulfill divine plans, most typically biological parents should be married and provide an example to children of God's love within a permanent relationship.

**Empirical Findings.** Empirical research on the intersection between religion and parents' expectations of the values and behavioral standards to which children should be held accountable is surprisingly sparse (Jenkins, 1992; Mahoney et al., 2001). A few studies indicate that adults (not necessarily parents) affiliated with Catholic and more conservative Christian groups place a higher value on children's obedience to authority figures and less emphasis on children's autonomy than other adults (for review, see Mahoney et al., 2001). Links between religion and parents' attitudes about other socialization goals seem to have attracted little attention. Although some work has addressed the intergenerational transmission of denominational affiliation and church attendance rates (e.g., Clark & Worthington, 1990), researchers have not yet directly examined whether parents' religious beliefs about parenting are connected to their perceptions of what specific types of child behavior are acceptable or

unacceptable at different ages.

Empirical research also appears to be limited regarding how religion shapes adults' views of the parenting role itself. In two recent studies, parents of typical preschoolers (Swank, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2000) and of young children with autism (Tarakeshwar & Pargament, in press) reported that they often imbue the role of parenting with spiritual meaning. This is consistent with several studies of parents of young children with developmental disabilities, who often describe a spiritual and transcendent dimension to their job as caretakers (for review, see Mahoney et al., 2001). Other evidence suggests that religiousness influences parents' sense of devotion to parenting. One national survey found that greater church attendance is tied to greater monitoring, supervision, and rule-setting of preadolescents by fathers (mothers' behavior was not addressed; Bartkowski & Xu, 2000). Greater involvement in public religious activities also relates to higher involvement of grandparents in their grandchildren's lives (King & Elder, 1999). Insightful qualitative research conducted by Marks and Dollahite (2001) on Latter-day Saint fathers of developmentally-disabled and chronically ill children also indicates that religiously-grounded expectations heighten a sense of responsibility in parenting. Finally, religion appears to shape general parenting styles. In a large national sample of families, parents' self-reports of greater personal religiousness has been linked with trained observers' ratings of authoritative parenting styles during parent-adolescent discussions (balance of warmth and firmness; Gunnoe, Hetherington & Reiss, 1999). Conservative Christian views of the Bible have also been related to parents' reports of more affection (Wilcox, 1998) and less verbal hostility (Bartkowski & Wilcox, 2000) toward preadolescents.

Taken together, the above literature hints at the power of religion to shape family members' perceptions of the objectives of parenting. The critical issue here, however, is whether

religion influences conflict between family members by promoting agreement or dissension about socialization goals and/or the appropriate roles that parents play in their children's lives. Indirect evidence for this question comes from a study showing that similarity between mothers' and adolescents' church attendance rates and self-rated importance of religion longitudinally predicts more satisfaction by both parties with their relationship (Pearce & Axinn, 1998). Greater general religiousness of family members has also been linked to more cohesiveness during observed family interactions (Brody, Stoneman, & Flor, 1996) and greater self-reported cohesion within the family unit (Abbot et al., 1990). Greater general importance of religion to parents also seems to facilitate better co-parenting between parents (Brody et al., 1994).

Hopefully, future research will better elucidate variations in religiously-based beliefs and practices that inform the goals of parenting (e.g., socialization outcomes) and more clearly determine whether sharing these beliefs diminishes the occurrence of parent-child conflict, whereas disputes about these goals would heighten parent-child conflict. For example, Conservative Protestant literature proposes a childrearing philosophy that holds children to a fairly strict code of socially conventional conduct (Bartkowski & Ellison, 1995). In contrast, other Christian literature suggests parents should aim to relinquish a personal need for or expectation of producing "perfect" children who neatly conform to society's expectations (Krokonko, 1986; Wallace, 1986). Parents are instead encouraged to become a source of unconditional love, trusting that God is doing the work through them, thereby freeing children from pressures to distort their identities. In short, regardless of what processes families use to resolve parent-child conflict (discussed more below), religion may facilitate agreement between parents and children about the types of child behavior that are viewed as acceptable and unacceptable. Given the centrality of childrearing to many religious orientations, clashes

between parents and children may take on additional meaning when either party refuses to accept religiously-based guidelines. When children violate religiously-grounded values, parents may experience this as a sign of personal spiritual failure. Furthermore, children who view their parents as failing to live up to God's mandates for parenting may experience greater anger and disillusionment.

Future research also needs to pay more attention to the developmental context of parent-child conflict. In contrast to marriage, where two adults jointly determine the goals to be pursued, parents inevitably dictate a particular set of norms to shape the parent-child relationship, although their ability to enforce these norms diminishes across time. From early to late childhood, parents possess disproportional resources to impose their expectations upon children about what constitutes desirable parent-child relationships (e.g., degree of intimacy and balance of control between parties) and child behavior (e.g., moral, social, and academic functioning). During adolescence, parents' authority becomes more ambiguous, while youth gain psychological and physical resources to resist parental directives. As youth increasingly gain equal footing in making choices about goals, the nature of parent-adolescent conflict becomes more similar to that between couples. Interestingly, religious traditions provide families with formal rituals to acknowledge the developmental transition to adolescence (e.g., Holy Confirmation, Bar Mitzvah) and to validate adolescents' growing autonomy to select their own values. Nevertheless, religion may be an important well-spring of conflict (or harmony) in parent-adolescent relationships. For example, parent-adolescent conflict may escalate to the degree to which adolescents adopt beliefs and behaviors that diverge from parents' religiously-prescribed values. The scarcity of research pinpointing the role that religion plays in parent-adolescent conflict leaves open many questions about these issues.

## **Religion as an Influence on Conflict Resolution Processes in Parent-Child Relationships**

**Substantive Messages that Overlap with Secular Discourse** Social scientists' efforts to understand how religion may guide parents' selection of conflict-resolution strategies have focused heavily on Conservative Protestant theologies that advocate a distinct disciplinary approach to young children who refuse to conform to parental rules. Although scholarship and popular media often portray the disciplinary practices of Conservative Protestants as fitting into an authoritarian style consisting of harsh punishment, arbitrary assertions of power, or otherwise unresponsive child-rearing practices, recent comprehensive reviews of conservative Christian media and theology paint a far different picture (Bartkowski & Wilcox, 2000). Specifically, this particular religious meaning system relies on Biblical interpretations to encourage parents to use mild corporal punishment judiciously with young children, untainted by anger or verbal outbursts, and in a family context marked by high levels of parental affection and involvement (Bartkowski & Xu, 2000; Bartkowski & Wilcox, 2000). The influence that religious systems of meaning besides Conservative Protestantism have on the strategies that parents select to resolve conflict with young children have received very limited attention by social scientists (Mahoney et al., 2001). Nevertheless, consistent with theological directives to nurture and protect children, some parents may hold deep religious beliefs that discourage physical discipline and encourage "low power" techniques to handle child non-compliance.

**Empirical Findings.** Empirical research confirms that Conservative Protestants are more likely to spank preadolescents than parents from other religious orientations and non-believers (Ellison et al. 1996a, 1996b; Gershoff, Miller, & Holden, 1999). However, well-controlled research has not substantiated concerns that Christian conservatism heightens the risk for severe or abusive methods of physical discipline when parents encounter conflict with

children (Mahoney et al., 2001). National surveys also suggest that parents who endorse conservative Christian views about the Bible are more affectionate (Wilcox, 1998), and yell at their children less often than other parents (Bartkowski & Wilcox, 2000). Overall, Conservative Protestants would appear to exert control over preadolescents during conflictual interactions in a manner consistent with their religious system of meaning.

The influence of religions other than Conservative Protestantism on parents' disciplinary strategies is not well documented empirically (Mahoney et al., 2001). In addition, the way in which parents from any religious orientation choose to deal with conflict with adolescents is far from clear. One study indicates that greater parental religiousness facilitates an authoritative parenting style during stressful problem-solving discussions with adolescents (Gunnoe et al., 1999). Another study links greater importance of religion to parents with greater disapproval of physical discipline in a combined sample of children and adolescents (Jackson et al., 1999). Clearly, more research is needed to better understand how parents with varying levels of commitment to different theological orientations (e.g., liberal, moderate, and conservative views on Christianity) differentially rely on religious beliefs in order to resolve conflict with children across development.

**Substantive Messages Unique to Religious Worldviews.** As with marital relationships, religion may also offer parents and children unique methods to address conflict. Pattison (1982) points out that parents may incorporate religious figures (e.g., God, Christ, angels or devils) into interactions with their children. An adaptive example of this method is a parent who suggests that both parties take a "time out" from a dispute and temporarily turn the issue over to God. Alternatively, a parent may escalate conflict by threatening a child with the divine punishment. This represents an attempt to heighten parental power by asserting a coalition with God, a

potentially common phenomena. For instance, 27% of school-aged children from mid-western U.S. have reported that at least one parent tells them God will punish them if they are bad (Nelsen & Kroliczak, 1984). Religiously-based methods of coping with stressors could also be relevant for parent-child conflict (Pargament, 1997; Mahoney et al., 2001). Effective conflict resolution patterns could be facilitated by both parties looking to God for guidance; seeking input from church members or clergy to mediate conflict; using religious practices and rituals to foster acceptance and forgiveness; and, benevolently reframing conflicts in religious terms. For example, Griffith (1986) describes a case example in which a mother withdrew from counter-productive power struggles with her college-age daughter after the therapist used the New Testament parable of the Prodigal Son. In this story, a father accepts his son's decision to squander his inheritance in a faraway land and later forgivingly welcomes the son when he returned home. The mother used this religious story as a model to help her face her powerlessness in forcing change on her daughter. A single parent of five adopted sisters, ages nine to fifteen, describes how her reliance on God helped her overcome urges she referred to as her "crusader complex" to excessively push her spiritual beliefs onto her children (Krokonko, 1986). Empirical research to substantiate the extent and impact of religious strategies to deal with conflict in parent-child relationships across development still needs to be done.

### **Recommendations for Social Scientists and Clinicians**

**Social scientists** The well documented pervasiveness and robustness of links between single-item, global indices of religiousness (e.g., type of denomination; frequency of prayer) and family life (Jenkins, 1992; Mahoney et al., 2001) compels social scientists to conduct in-depth investigations on the mechanisms through which religious systems of meaning may influence family interaction patterns. The primary assertion made in this paper is that religion plays an

important role in family conflict by shaping beliefs about the goals and pathways that should be pursued in family life as well as providing guidelines about the conflict resolution processes that are appropriate for marital and parent-child relationships. The degree to which individual family members find themselves agreeing and disagreeing about theologically-grounded guidelines could minimize or heighten conflict over issues. To confirm these suppositions, researchers need to give more attention to the substantive messages that religions have for family relations. More specifically, social scientists need to develop measures that assess different types of religiously-based beliefs about the parameters of marriage and parenting as well as various religiously-based beliefs and practices invoked to resolve marital and parent-child conflict. The argument that psychologists should aspire to respect and understand the substantive elements of religion is consistent with recent calls for a constructive view of the relationship between psychology and religion, as well as arguments against reducing the determinants of either scientific or religious systems of meaning to social-cultural forces alone (Jones, 1994).

Attention to several other issues would also enhance future research. First, when investigating the impact of religion on well-being, researchers need to distinguish among the multiple levels of a family system, including the functioning of individual family members and relationships within a family system (e.g., marital, parent-child, sibling dyads; extended family relations). For example, substantive messages from some religions may reduce the frequency of conflict within family relationships (desirable outcome), but at what some might consider to be an excessive cost to a given family member's well-being or autonomy (undesirable outcome). Alternatively, the beliefs and practices of a religious systems of meaning could exacerbate conflict in one dyad (e.g., parent-adolescent interactions) while protecting another dyad (e.g., parent-toddler interactions). Second, the diversity of religious systems of meaning deserve far



better illumination. This would involve exploring the similarities and differences in both the goals and the interactional processes for family life that are promoted by different theological orientations (e.g., liberal versus conservative; Christian, Jewish, Islam, or Hindu backgrounds), which are likely to be tied to different outcomes for each relationship and member in a family system. To date, empirical research in this area has exclusively involved Judeo-Christian perspectives with the overwhelming bulk of research focused on Conservative Protestant theology (Jenkins, 1992; Mahoney et al., 2001). Furthermore, even in the U.S., this subgroup comprises only about 25% of the population (Hodge, 2000) whereas 53-60% of married Americans attend a church at least once a month (Heaton & Pratt, 1990). In a similar manner, future research on the role of religion in family relations needs to go beyond studying predominantly Caucasian populations and "traditional" family systems. Research should incorporate non-Caucasian ethnic groups as well as "non-traditional" families, such as single-parent families, blended families, and families headed by same-sex partners. Overall, more pluralistic and multi-layered empirical investigations are clearly needed.

**Clinicians** For clinicians and clergy who work with families, religion offers rich insight into possible sources and solutions to conflictual family interactions. Although disputes about religious activities (e.g., church attendance) rarely appear to be a primary presenting problem for secular therapists who work with couples (e.g., Whisman, Dixon, & Johnson, 1997) or with parents and adolescents (e.g., Robin & Foster, 1989), several benefits proceed from addressing connections between religion and family conflict in clinical practice. These include: 1) clarifying underlying assumptions that may contribute to conflict in the family system via an exploration of religiously-based language systems and expectations about marriage and parenting (e.g., Griffith, 1986; Prest & Keller, 1993); and 2) identifying ways that religious beliefs and rituals could

trigger and reinforce family members' use of conflict-resolution methods that are adaptive (e.g., Giblin, 1993; Butler & Harper, 1994; Stanley et al., 1998) and maladaptive (e.g., Pattison, 1982; Prest & Keller, 1993; Rotz et al., 1993). New tools have recently been developed to facilitate clinicians' assessment of religion in marriage and family therapy, including "spiritual genograms," which uncover the role of religion throughout multiple generations (Frame, 2000), and "spiritual ecomaps," which diagram a family's integration of religious rituals, God/transcendent, faith community, spiritual leader(s), parents' spiritual tradition and transpersonal beings (e.g., angels, devils) into their current family functioning (Hodge, 2000). These methods represent initial responses to ethical directives requiring marital and family therapists to develop expertise in addressing religious and spiritual concerns of clients, just as skills and sensitivity are required for other cultural issues (Huag, 1998; Jones, 1994).

In sum, this paper advocates that social scientists and practitioners should strive to develop a better understanding of how religion as a system of meaning may influence the manifestation of conflict in marital and parent-child relationships, and the selection of strategies to resolve family conflict. Religion systems of meaning may shape the emergence of marital and parent-child conflict by promoting distinct substantive guidelines that family members are encouraged to embrace about the appropriate goals of marriage and parenting, and the means to achieve these objectives. The degree to which family members (dis)agree about these messages could increase or decrease the frequency and intensity of conflict about particular topics. Religions also offer families a variety of methods grounded in religion to employ to resolve conflict after it erupts. While available empirical findings hint at the potential power of religion to influence conflictual family interactions, more direct and detailed evidence is needed to confirm the extent and implications of religion's involvement in this dimension of family

functioning.

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Parents of preschool and elementary\_age children blend the use of firm discipline strategies to curb unacceptable behavior with sensitive responses to age\_appropriate bids for autonomy in decision making. As children approach adolescence, parents shift increasingly toward egalitarianism in conflict resolution.