THE SPIRITUALITY OF US: RELATIONAL SPIRITUALITY IN THE CONTEXT OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

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"Soul mate." "Kindred spirits." "A match made in heaven." "Sacred vows." "The miracle of birth." "A family that prays together stays together." These commonplace phrases speak to entrenched historical ties between faith and family life. Hundreds of self-help books and diverse religious communities offer advice on how to draw on the sacred to build a healthy family. Social scientists, however, have primarily been curious about the "spirituality of me" rather than the "spirituality of us." For instance, the field of the psychology of religion and spirituality has devoted itself to uncovering positive and negative roles that faith plays for the health and well-being for individuals, rather than for relationships (Hood, Hill, & Spilka, 2009; Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Paloutzian & Park, 2005). Furthermore, the comparatively small number of peer-reviewed, scientific studies devoted to faith and family life depend heavily on global indicators of a given family member's own religiousness. For example, about 75% to 80% of quantitative studies published in the past 3 decades on the intersection of faith and family have relied on one- or two-item measures of a spouse's or a parent's religious affiliation (e.g., Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, none, other), frequency of worship attendance, self-reported salience of religion in daily life, or biblical literalism (Mahoney, 2010; Mahoney, Pargament, Swank, & Tarakeshwar, 2001). But although people who more often attend services and say religion is important tend to report better family functioning, the magnitude of such associations is small (Mahoney, 2010; Mahoney et al., 2001). More problematic, global items offer little insight into

unique ways that religion and spirituality can help or harm family relationships. For instance, a therapist who learns that a client attends a Methodist church twice a month would have few clues about specific spiritual beliefs the client holds about family life that could be part of the problem or the solution in the client's marital and parental difficulties. Similarly, policy makers who know that higher attendance at any place of worship in the United States is statistically, but weakly, linked to lower rates of divorce or child physical abuse would presumably hesitate to make the blank injunction that all parents go to religious services more often to protect U.S. children from marital dissolution or child maltreatment. Rather, societies and therapists around the globe would benefit from a deeper appreciation of the specific ways that spirituality, pursued within and outside of different religious institutions, can help bind families together or tear them apart.

My goal in this chapter is to provide scientists and practitioners with a map to guide in-depth explorations into various ways that spiritual beliefs or practices can be integrated into family relationships. My assumption is that both scholars who want to understand all types of families as well as practitioners who want to help unhappy families would benefit from richer conceptual models to guide research and practice on faith and family life. Thus, I focus on three tiers of spiritual mechanisms that could operate as either helpful resources or painful struggles in the co-occurring searches for the sacred and for family relationships. These three tiers

of mechanisms are embedded in a conceptual framework I have previously introduced (Mahoney, 2010), labeled "relational spirituality," which is summarized in Table 20.1. I start with an overview of key elements of the framework. I then spend the bulk of the chapter elaborating the three tiers of mechanisms (relationship with God, family relationship, relationship with religious community). For each tier, I start with an overview, which is followed by a discussion of possible mechanisms in that tier that could function as spiritual resources and then mechanisms that reflect spiritual struggles. Both resources and struggles in each tier are divided according to three stages of family life (discovery, maintenance, and transformation). Throughout I illustrate various mechanisms, highlighting available studies and pointing out gaps in direct evidence. Although I mention some findings based on global markers of religiousness (also see top row of Table 20.1), because of space constraints, I refer researchers elsewhere for lengthier, more technical reviews and critiques of these findings written for researchers (e.g., Dollahite & Marks, 2009; Mahoney, 2010; Mahoney et al., 2001), and a related summary written for general audiences (Mahoney, 2009). Readers can also access citation lists of all the peer-reviewed studies that I located from 1980 to 1999 in Mahoney et al. (2001) and from 1999–2009 at http://www.bgsu.edu/departments/psych/spirituality, which also has measures posted to assess some of the spiritual mechanisms discussed in this chapter (e.g., sanctification of marriage or parenting; benevolent prayer for a partner).

RELATIONAL SPIRITUALITY FRAMEWORK: OVERVIEW OF KEY ELEMENTS

Overview of Spirituality and Religion

For the purpose of this chapter, *spirituality* refers to "the search for the sacred" (see Chapter 1 in this volume) and the two elements of this definition merit review. In brief, at its core, *the sacred* refers to human perceptions of the divine, God, or transcendent reality, but any aspect of life can be perceived as possessing divine character and significance (Mahoney, Pargament, & Hernandez, in press; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). Thus, the heart of the

sacred can extend to family relationships as well as other domains of life (e.g., career, community work, nature), with individuals differing in the constellation of elements that encompass the entire sphere of the sacred (Mahoney et al., in press). *The search* includes three dynamic and recursive stages of the discovery, maintenance, and transformation of the sacred across the life span (Pargament, 2007). Discovery refers to developing an orientation to the sacred via proactive or passive journeys down solitary or communal roads of learning. Maintenance involves efforts to conserve one's orientation to the sacred during ordinary daily life and in times of trouble. Transformation refers to seeking out a fundamentally different orientation to the sacred, whether gradually or rapidly prompted by life transitions or crises.

For the purpose of this chapter, *religion* refers to "the search for significance that occurs within the context of established institutions that are designed to facilitate spirituality" (see Chapter 1 in this volume). As Pargament (1997, 2007) has discussed, the search for significance involves identifying the most important destinations to pursue in life, and the pathways to take to arrive at one's most cherished goals. Historically and across cultures, religious institutions have influenced this identification process, helping to define and reinforce cultural norms about what ends in life should be of ultimate value and what means should be used to reach desired ends (see Chapter 1 in this volume). Religious institutions have particularly set forth and defended norms about the destinations and pathways that people should pursue to fulfill sacred ideals about family life. For example, in conservative and many mainline Christian groups, the "good family" that people should intentionally aim to create includes a married heterosexual couple with biological children (Edgell, 2003, 2005; Onedera, 2008), whereas some liberal Christian groups affirm that the intentional creation of same-sex or single-parent families can be equally good in the eyes of God (Onedera, 2008; Ruether, 2000). In either case, Christians who adhere to the norms advocated by their religious subgroup may more easily draw on spirituality as a resource to form and sustain their families. Conversely, Christians who deviate from familial norms endorsed by their religious

TABLE 20.1

Relational Spirituality Framework

		Stages of family relationships		
		Discovery	**Maintenance**	**Transformation**
Relational spirituality framework		**Goal: Create and structure bond**	**Goal: Conserve and protect bond**	**Goal: Reform or exit distressed bond**
Markers of spiritual mechanisms Importance of religion and/or attendance is related to . . .		Better odds of marriage not cohabitation; women wanting and having children when married; and married men spending time with offspring.	Better odds of marital satisfaction and positive parenting, and lower odds of divorce, infidelity, domestic violence, and child physical abuse.	Almost no research focuses on subsamples of distressed families coping with domestic violence, infertility, infidelity, child abuse, and other serious issues.
Three tiers of spiritual mechanisms (illustrative mechanisms in italics)				
Tier 1: Relationship with God	**Resources**	*Support from God* * May motivate creation of committed adult union and parent–child relationship. * May guide formation and strengthen commitment to traditional or nontraditional family structures.	*Prayer for a partner's well-being* √ Improves relationship quality. *Serenity prayer about relationship* * May aid good decisions and skills to mindfully accept or proactively address relationship imperfections.	*Support from God to cope effectively* √ Predicts less depression and more personal growth over time for postdivorce adjustment. * May enhance coping with many family crises or dysfunction.
	Struggles	*Struggles with God* * Over the creation or structure of adult union or family unit may weaken relationship commitment and stability.	*Displace dyadic struggles onto God* * May undermine effective resolution of dyadic conflict.	*Turn to God to forgive (TGF) struggles* √ TGF struggles over divorce predict less forgiveness of ex-spouse and more dyadic verbal hostility over time.
Tier 2: Relationship with family member(s) invested with spiritual properties	**Resources**	*Sanctification of marriage* √ Wedding vows tied to viewing marriage as sacred by heterosexuals and, in turn, self-reported commitment. *Sanctification of parenthood* * May motivate planned pregnancy and commitment to parent–child bond.	*Sanctification of adult union* √ Enhances relationship quality for married, same-sex, and cohabiting couples. *Spiritual disclosure and intimacy* √ Relates to relational quality for college students and mothers.	*Sanctification of marriage* * Sanctification may motivate efforts to repair a distressed marriage.
	Struggles	*Struggles over sanctification of family unit* * Infertility may trigger spiritual struggles over acceptable means to form a sacred parent–child relationship.	*Spiritual one-upmanship* √ Tied to greater verbal hostility and relational distress in college student–parent relationship.	*Desecration or sacred loss* √ Viewing divorce or parental divorce as a sacred injury relates to greater postdivorce personal distress.

TABLE 20.1 (Continued)

Relational Spirituality Framework

Tier 3: Relationship with religious community	Resources	Support from religious group * May motivate public formation of committed bond and viewing it as sacred.	Support from religious group * May encourage helpful Tier 1 and Tier 2 spiritual mechanisms.	Support from religious group √ Is tied to leaving and reconciling with abusive partners.
	Struggles	Struggles with religious group * Over the creation or structure of family bond may decrease public formation and commitment to family relationships.	Triangulation of religious group * May reinforce harmful Tier 1 and Tier 2 spiritual mechanisms.	Struggles with religious group * May escalate blame, hostility, and physical aggression by abusive parents or between spouses.

Note. √ findings exist; * studies needed.

subgroup may more often experience spiritual struggles that intensify family-related distress and jeopardize their access to spiritual resources to strengthen their families. The dual-edged potential of religion to help or hinder peoples' efforts to integrate spirituality and family life echoes throughout this chapter.

Overview of Stages of Family Relationships

For the purpose of this chapter, *relational spirituality* refers to situations in which the search for the sacred is united, for better or worse, with the search for human relationships. Given that this chapter focuses on family life, the relational spirituality framework in Table 20.1 is designed to capture the multidimensional intersections of these co-occurring searches within a family context. Paralleling an individual's search for the sacred (i.e., spirituality), the relational spirituality framework discriminates three recursive stages over time in an individual's search for relationships: (a) discovery—creating and structuring the relationships, (b) maintenance—conserving and protecting the relationships, and (c) transformation—reforming or exiting distressed relationships that call for fundamental change. As seen in Table 20.1, the diverse family topics that have been empirically linked to global markers of religiousness can be sorted into these three stages, including issues pertaining to the formation of family relationships (e.g., union formation, maternal

fertility), their maintenance (e.g., marital satisfaction or sexual fidelity; parental warmth or use of spanking), and their transformation when family crises or dysfunction occurs (e.g., coping with divorce and domestic violence). As is discussed in more detail in Mahoney et al. (2001) and Mahoney (2010), greater religious attendance and overall salience of religion tends to be tied to the formation of traditional family bonds (i.e., married heterosexuals, birth of children within marriage) and the maintenance of traditional or nontraditional family ties. Yet, such broad generalizations can frustrate both researchers and clinicians who want deeper insights into more malleable, specific, and unique spiritual cognitions or behaviors that contribute to harmony or strife across diverse family relationships. For example, although higher religious attendance could signal many distinctive spiritual constructs that influence family functioning, greater involvement in a religious group may reflect psychosocial processes that are not unique to religious institutions, such as social support or coercion to adhere to socially conservative norms about family life.

Overview of Three Tiers of Spiritual Mechanisms

To advance theory and research on unique spiritual constructs that may shape family relationships, the relational spirituality framework discriminates three tiers of mechanisms that could operate in the

discovery, maintenance, and transformation of family relationships. Namely, Mahoney (2010) has suggested that the search for family relationships could be influenced by (a) one or more family member's relationship with the divine/God, (b) one or more family relationships invested with spiritual properties, and (c) one or more family member's relationship with religious communities. The rest of this chapter illustrates these three sets of processes across the three major stages of family relationships. The substantive content of the spiritual cognitions and practices manifested within a particular spiritual mechanism determines whether the process is likely to help or harm relational (and individual) functioning in a particular relationship context.

TIER 1: RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD IN THE SEARCH FOR FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Tier 1: Overview

Consistent with scholarship on spiritual development (see Chapter 28 in this volume), an individual's search for the sacred involves developing an understanding of the divine, God, or transcendent reality, and taking a position in relation to this central element of the sacred. For many, such a connection represents a psychologically powerful bond. For example, people speak of having formed a personal relationship with an external deity who has well-delineated characteristics (see Chapter 15 in this volume); however, people also speak of experiencing profound connections to a spark of the divine within the self or to supernatural forces that permeate all of existence (Pargament, 2007; see Volume 2, Chapter 7, this handbook). People travel along diverse cognitive and behavioral pathways to foster their felt connections to supernatural forces, within and outside the self. These pathways range from solitary exploration to engagement in religious networks. From a family system's perspective, these endeavors may yield a perceived connection with the divine that operates alongside other family relationships, with or without the awareness of other family members. Given that empirical studies of faith and family life rely virtually exclusively on samples drawn from monotheistic societies that are predominantly composed of Christians with minorities of nonaffiliated individuals, Jews, Latter Day Saints, or Muslims, I hereafter use the term *God* in this chapter to refer to individuals' felt connection with the core of the sacred, recognizing that peoples' images of God—theistic or nontheistic, tangible or abstract, immanent or transcendent, personal or transpersonal—vary widely across individuals, communities, and cultures (see Part III in this volume).

Tier 1 Resources: Family Member's Relationship With God as a Resource

Discovery stage.   Conceptually, people can come to know God as a trusted figure who affirms their goals for family relationships and helps them to reach these ends (Mahoney, 2005). Indeed, religions offer abundant and diverse messages about God's intentions for family life that people use to reinforce their choices in forming family ties (Onedera, 2008). Empirical findings hint that people may often seek God's affirmation for their approach to creating a stable intimate union. For example, higher religious attendance and importance of religion increases the likelihood that heterosexual couples marry instead of cohabit and that same-sex couples cement their bond via commitment ceremonies and legal procedures (e.g., wills, mortgages; Mahoney, 2010). Furthermore, significant parallelism exists between the style of one's attachment to God and to romantic partners, implying that a secure attachment to God provides people with a secure sense of self that helps them select well-matched partners (see Chapter 7 in this volume). Conversely, people who report insecure attachments to God tend to form unions marked by ambivalence or anxiety that bode poorly for relational and individual adjustment. Yet studies are needed that directly identify specific ways that individuals turn to God to help them define and prioritize the qualities they seek in a romantic partner and to decide when an intimate relationship merits matrimony or long-term commitment. One important question is whether people of all ages turn to God to cope with frustration when dating, rather than become involved with an unsuitable partner or give up the quest entirely. Another key question is whether

people rely on God after a romance has begun to make adaptive decisions about the pace and order that the pair journeys through the stages of causal dating, monogamous dating, sexual intercourse, cohabitation, marriage, and becoming coparents.

When it comes to forming family units, religious attendance and importance increases the odds that women intend to become mothers, bear children within marriage, and get married after a nonmarital birth (Mahoney, 2010). Married men who attend services more often also tend to spend more leisure time with children rather than being absent or disengaged fathers (Mahoney, 2010). Only one study, which focused on adoption, could be located that has examined associations between religious factors and intentionally creating a nontraditional family unit (Hollingsworth, 2000). Specifically, greater importance of religion emerged as a strong factor tied to adoption by White U.S. women out of a host of other motivations and fertility issues. No studies were found on religious factors in becoming a step- or foster parent or on the use of assisted reproductive technology. To the degree that religious attendance or importance are proxy variables for a supportive relationship with God, the above findings hint that a sense of being called to parenthood by God could motivate men and women's decisions to create a parent–child relationship. But, once again, studies are needed that directly examine specific ways that men or women may turn to God to facilitate their decisions about the timing and family context to form a parent-child bond. Hypothetically, partnered and single individuals from different sexual orientations may invest more effort in pursuing planned parenthood, whether via conventional or unconventional routes, if they believe God validates their chosen ends and means (Mahoney & Krumrei, in press).

Maintenance stage. God is often portrayed by religious traditions as a source of strength that people can rely on to enact virtues to sustain family bonds after they are formed (Onedera, 2008; see Volume 2, Chapter 9, this handbook). Because greater general religiousness marginally, but persistently, predicts lower risk of divorce and greater martial satisfaction, especially if spouses are religiously similar (Mahoney, 2010), researchers have begun to try

to uncover specific and robust ways that adults may partner with God to help them maintain their unions. One compelling program of research by Fincham, Beach, Lambert, Stillman, and Braithwaite (2008) found that benevolent prayer for a romantic partner facilitates relational quality. In their exemplary series of studies with college students, these researchers found that privately praying for a romantic partner's well-being increased relationship satisfaction longitudinally (Fincham et al., 2008); furthermore, these effects persisted beyond the impact of other key positive and negative relationship processes and how often either the individual or the pair prayed. Their experimental studies also found that praying for a person with whom one has a close relationship increased the prayer's selfless concern, gratitude, and forgiveness of the other person (see Volume 2, Chapter 24, this handbook). In addition, Beach et al. (2011) conducted a randomized experiment with African American couples recruited from the community to test the effects of benevolent prayer for a spouse. Specifically, couples were randomly assigned to one of three conditions: (a) a marital education program that previously has been found to improve marital quality (i.e., the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program [PREP]), (b) the same program supplemented with a module focused on private prayer for partner, and (c) self-help reading materials only. Over time, prayer for partner enhanced marital outcomes for wives beyond the beneficial effects of participating in PREP or self-help efforts. Prayer, however, did not function as an added resource beyond PREP for husbands' marital satisfaction.

In theorizing why benevolent prayer for another's well-being predicts desirable relational outcomes, Fincham and Beach (see Volume 2, Chapter 24, this handbook) reason that this kind of prayer may help humans cope effectively with interpersonal conflict by shifting the praying person's motivational attention away from winning an immediate battle and toward the long-term goal of protecting the union. Prayer may help prime spouses to inhibit their use of tactics during conflicts that are counterproductive for the relationship, such as verbal hostility or withdrawal, and instead proactively engage in collaboration, compromise, or acceptance. Prayer may

facilitate this motivational shift by reminding individuals of God's loving views of each partner, God's desire for marital permanence, and God's directives to be selfless, patient, honest, accountable, compassionate, and forgiving. Further prayer has been shown to heighten the perception that a relationship itself is a sacred gift from God that, as elaborated in a later section, may intensify people's motivation to act in productive ways that preserve their bond.

These speculations that prayer for a partner can help couples manage conflict effectively dovetail with findings from qualitative research on marriage that resonate with theologian Reinhold Niebuhr's well-known "serenity prayer." Namely, in one qualitative study of 20 Catholics in long-term marriages, many spouses reported that their relationship with God, prayer, and meditation helped them both to accept their spouse's shortcomings (i.e., serenity to accept what cannot be changed) and to nondefensively initiate discussions to resolve marital disputes (i.e., courage to change what can be changed; Marsh & Dallos, 2000), thereby inhibiting harmful expressions of anger toward the spouse. Similar findings emerged in qualitative interviews with 57 highly religious couples in long-term marriages (average 21 years) from diverse religious traditions (Catholic; Jewish; Muslim; Fundamentalist, Evangelical and Mainline Protestant; Greek Orthodox). These couples said that religion motivated them (a) to focus on a sacred vision and purpose of the marriage and (b) to enact relational virtues to fulfill the goals of marriage (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006). They also claimed that their relationship with God provided perspective on their partner's limitations and reminded them of the overarching goal of marital permanence, which helped them proactively address marital conflicts (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006), avoid sexual infidelity (Dollahite & Lambert, 2007), and strengthen their commitment (Lambert & Dollahite, 2007). As one spouse put it:

> We've been married over 19 years and sometimes your spouse drives you crazy, but you love him. And sometimes you just have to see him as God sees him. Not sometimes, all the time, actually. . . .

The set of wonderful qualities that you married him for are always, and that they can never lose that, then it just helps you get over the tough spots. (Lambert & Dollahite, 2007, p. 605)

The ubiquity of prayer for a loved one extends to the parenting context. In a 2002 national survey, for example, 60% of parents of adolescents said they prayed for their teen daily, with another 20% saying they did this a few times per week (National Center for Family & Marriage Research, 2011). In addition, greater religious attendance or salience has been repeatedly tied to more positive parenting in traditional and nontraditional families (Mahoney, 2010; Mahoney et al., 2001). Collectively, these findings imply that some parents experience God as an authority or coparental figure who wants them to make sacrifices to satisfy their children's spiritual, nutritional, educational, and medical needs, and to help them be more engaged and efficacious in their parenting. Such salutary links, however, did not emerge in two quantitative studies in which parents were specifically asked about turning to God to cope with parenting at-risk preschoolers (Dumas & Nissley-Tsiopinis, 2006) or children with autism (Tarakeshwar & Pargament, 2001). The null findings in these two cross-sectional studies may reflect stress-mobilization processes in which more stressed parents may call on God more often when they are taxed or overwhelmed, but the potential benefits of seeking divine support become evident only later.

More research is needed that pinpoints family members' felt relationships with God as a resource for different levels of family systems, including dyadic relationships (e.g., marital, parent–child), triadic units (e.g., coparents and one child, one parent and two siblings), and whole family dynamics. Important leads for further work include qualitative research suggesting that agreement between evangelical Christian parents about God's intentions for their parenting goals and practices strengthens their coparenting alliance and mutual investment in parenting (Edgell, 2005). Other qualitative studies suggest that single parents often experience God as an ever-present, unique ally who helps them parent responsibly without a partner (Sparks, Peterson, &

Tangenberg, 2005). Finally, parents and offspring who have a similar type of relationship with God may enjoy a high degree of relational cohesiveness (e.g., Abbott, Berry, & Meredith, 1990).

Transformation stage. Surveys of national or community samples of families find that higher religious attendance by Americans lowers the risk of divorce, infidelity, domestic violence, and child physical abuse (Mahoney, 2001; Mahoney et al., 2001). Assuming religious attendance reflects a positive relationship with God for some people, these findings imply that seeking support from God may help in *preventing* relational problems from occurring in families. A very different question is whether a supportive relationship with God could help in *intervening* after family dysfunction or crises occur. Ample research on religious coping with nonfamilial stressors (e.g., natural disasters, illness; Pargament, 1997, 2007; see also Chapter 19 in this volume) suggests that people may often turn to God to help them respond adaptively to major familial stressors.

Yet available research offers families, clergy, and practitioners little guidance on ways on that faith could be part of the solution for highly distressed couples or families because studies thus far have focused on community samples, with two notable exceptions. First, qualitative interviews of female survivors of domestic violence suggest that some women rely on their relationship with God for courage to confront mistreatment by partners and to require change as a condition of reconciliation (Nason-Clark, 1997; Yick, 2008). But to initiate change, women with conservative religious identities must often alter their understanding of God's views about women's rights within marital relationships and adopt the view that God condones divorce if partners will not change. Second, a quantitative study found that divorcees who more often turned to God as a source of support during the year after their divorce reported greater personal growth longitudinally but, unexpectedly, not less depression or conflict with an ex-spouse (Krumrei, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2011b). Also contrary to expectations, a study of parental divorce found that college students who recalled seeking more support from God when their parents divorced within the prior 5 years were

more likely to report psychological distress currently (Warner, Mahoney, & Krumrei, 2009). These studies highlight the need for more research with distressed familial subgroups on the ways that people can rely on a relationship with God to reform or exit problematic family structures or processes and adaptively recover from broken family ties.

Tier 1 Struggles: Family Member's Relationship With God as a Struggle

Discovery stage. As people search for family relationships, they may encounter conflicts with God. Just as interpersonal conflict can be defined as an incompatibility between individuals or groups in their selection and pursuit of goals (Fincham & Bradbury, 1991), people may encounter serious incompatibilities in their own desires versus what they view as God's "will" about family life. Such conflicts with God represent one type of spiritual struggle (see Chapter 25 in this volume). Broadly speaking, situations that threaten or harm people's spirituality often trigger spiritual struggles to conserve or transform their approach to the sacred, including their connection to the divine (Pargament, 1997, 2007). Indeed, people may wrestle with God over the ideal ends and means in their search for family relationships. An inability to reconcile their own and God's wishes about family matters may mire people down in spiritual, relational, and psychological turmoil as people face the choice to leave either God or loved ones behind.

To illustrate the potential conflict that people could experience with God about the formation of family ties, consider the situation faced by nonheterosexuals raised to believe that God only approves of heterosexual relationships (see Chapter 34 in this volume). Many individuals appear to reject this notion and instead sustain a connection to God as they pursue same-sex unions. Specifically, a national U.S. survey found no differences in how often bisexual, gay, and lesbian individuals pray compared with heterosexuals, with all groups praying, on average, between once a day to several times per week (Sherkat, 2002; personal communication, August 19, 2011). Yet studies are needed that directly examine struggles with God that people from any sexual

orientation face when their goal to be married seems unattainable. For example, those who view God as an all-loving, omnipotent being who desires marriage for faithful followers may become angry or confused with God if they have prayed for a spouse and patiently followed what they perceive are God's mandates for dating, but years go by without a suitable partner materializing. This may be taken as a sign that God has failed to intervene. Another line of needed research involves struggles with God over the best pathways to establish a union. For example, people who violate what they believe God desires, perhaps cohabiting before engagement or having a child out of wedlock, may persist in a dysfunctional relationship with an uncommitted partner, hoping that eventually marriage will make things right in God's eyes.

Painful struggles with God might also emerge when people form family units, although studies are needed. One relevant finding is that unmarried U.S. fathers who live in impoverished, urban cities are less likely to live with or spend time with their offspring if they have a conservative Christian background (Wildeman, 2008). Perhaps unmarried parents who view the circumstances of the birth of a child as contrary to God's precepts more often experience a sense of shame or unworthiness that compromises their attachment to their child. Married spouses might also struggle with God over their ambivalence about an unintended pregnancy that interferes with forming a strong parent–child or coparental alliance.

Maintenance stage. People in distressed relationships might also seek support from God to maintain family ties in ways that backfire. For example, Butler and Harper (1994) described ways that couples in marital therapy may privately seek solace from God and displace their marital woes onto God rather than effectively communicate with their spouse. More controlled research needs to examine the seemingly rare, but potentially toxic, ways that individuals may turn to God to cope with marital difficulties. For example, some may pray for God to change the spouse rather than directly confront marital issues. People may also struggle with God over a secret desire to exit a dissatisfying marriage,

especially in absence of clear-cut violations of marital vows that might justify a divorce in God's eyes. Such undisclosed struggles could take a toll on individuals, exacerbating private misgivings that further strain the marriage.

Given that children and adolescents from more religiously engaged families tend to exhibit fewer behavioral problems than other families (e.g., Smith, 2005), some parents may feel a strong sense of responsibility to God to socialize their offspring effectively. Such parents may, in turn, experience struggles with God if they have difficulties eliciting and maintaining positive child behavior. Such struggles could range from feelings of shame, guilt, or punishment about parental ineffectiveness to confusion and anger with God about their children's problems to doubts and despair about God's failure to intervene. Two studies have examined spiritual struggles with parenting, both of which used negative religious coping with items that predominantly assessed strain in a parent's relationship with God. For both parents of at-risk preschoolers (Dumas & Nissley-Tsiopinis, 2006) and children with autism (Tarakeshwar & Pargament, 2001), greater spiritual struggles were correlated with greater parental distress and depression. Clearly, more research is needed on ways that parents' relationships God could exacerbate poor parental and coparental adjustment, particularly when youth exhibit maladjustment.

Transformation stage. As noted, studies on faith and family life have overwhelmingly relied on national or community samples rather than subgroups of distressed couples or families. As a result, much remains to be learned about ways that people may become mired in struggles with God that thwart radical change in the face of family crises or dysfunction. Two lines of research highlight the possibility that faith could be part of the problem in some distressed families. First, qualitative studies of female survivors of domestic violence indicate that some women struggle with God about whether forgiveness requires them to reconcile with an abusive partner. Others wrestle with the risk of losing their relationship with God by failing to make the marriage work, particularly if children are involved,

versus their risks of reconciling repeatedly with an abusive partner who verbally repents but fails to change behaviorally (Nason-Clark, 1997; Yick, 2008). Second, quantitative research on postdivorce adjustment indicates that the more that divorcees engaged in negative spiritual coping strategies in the year following the marital dissolution, the more depression and conflict with the ex-spouse they longitudinally reported. These adverse effects remained after controlling for initial postdivorce adjustment, overall religious involvement, and nonreligious methods of coping with divorce during the subsequent year (Krumrei et al., 2011b). Furthermore, the more divorcees specifically turned to God to try to forgive themselves, their ex-spouse, and God for their divorce over time, the more they viewed their ex-spouse as controlled by demonic forces and the more both ex-spouses engaged in verbal aggression with each other (Krumrei, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2008). College students who reported having had spiritual struggles with parental divorce when it occurred also reported greater current psychosocial maladjustment (Warner et al., 2009). These initial findings highlight the need for more research with distressed samples to better understand maladaptive ways of turning to God to cope with family problems, such as triangulating God into dysfunctional family dynamics, which then escalates individual and family maladjustment.

TIER 2: A FAMILY RELATIONSHIP AS SPIRITUAL IN THE SEARCH FOR FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Tier 2: Overview

The search for the sacred can be woven into the search for family relationships when a family relationship itself is invested with spiritual properties. Religions offer people a myriad of spiritual beliefs and rituals that transport family relationships to the sacred realm (Onedera, 2008). Religious weddings and baby-naming ceremonies vividly exemplify occasions in which family bonds are enveloped in a rich web of spiritual cognitions, behaviors, and emotions. In turn, viewing family bonds through a sacred lens and engaging in spiritual activities with family members may help motivate people to create

and maintain family ties. Yet when family relationships go awry, people may encounter painful struggles as they attempt to conserve or transform their understanding of a given family bond as a spiritual end and means. This section focuses on ways that family relationships themselves can function as a spiritual resource or struggle. Emerging research shows that even those who do not report having a personal or close relationship with a deity nevertheless often experience family life as having a spiritual dimension. For example, all of the heterosexual couples from diverse religious traditions who Dollahite and colleagues recruited for qualitative interviews because they were highly religious imbued their marriage with divine qualities, but not all of them construed God as an interactive third "person" in the union (Goodman & Dollahite, 2006).

Tier 2 Resources: Spiritual Family Relationship as a Resource

Discovery stage.   Studies on the sanctification of intimate adult relationships indicate that many U.S. heterosexual and same-sex couples perceive their marital or cohabiting union as having a spiritual dimension (for a review, see Mahoney et al., in press). "Sanctification" is a construct broadly conceptualized for psychological research as "perceiving an aspect of life as having divine significance and meaning" (Mahoney et al., in press; Pargament & Mahoney, 2005). Thus far, sanctification has been operationalized in two ways. Nontheistic sanctification involves perceiving a relationship as having sacred qualities. For example, in a study of married couples pregnant with their first child, most spouses agreed to some degree (i.e., ratings above anchor of "neutral" to "strongly agree") that my marriage "is sacred to me" (93% of wives; 90% of husbands), "seems like a miracle to me" (88%, 73%), and "connects my spouse and me to something greater than ourselves" (84%, 78%; Mahoney, Pargament, & DeMaris, 2009). Likewise, most of these couples endorsed items tapping into theistic sanctification, which refers to perceiving a bond to be a manifestation of God. Examples include "God played a role in how I ended up being married to my spouse" (86% of wives; 79% of husbands),

"I see God's handiwork in my marriage" (84%, 74%), and "In mysterious ways, God touches my marriage" (79%; 74%). Notably these married couples from the U.S. Midwest attended religious services at rates similar to other married U.S. couples with children, implying that many married Americans may view their marriages as having divine significance. Furthermore, in a national sample of dating and cohabiting couples, 55% of respondents endorsed "strongly agree" to the statement "God is at the center of my relationship" (Henderson, Ellison, & Glenn, 2010). Similarly, many parents also report that they view parenting as a sacred calling (Mahoney et al., in press).

Consistent with the benefits of sanctification for other aspects of life, greater sanctification of an adult union is tied to greater relational satisfaction, net of other factors (Mahoney et al., in press). Thus, although studies are needed to verify whether sanctification beliefs facilitate the formation of couples' relationships, hypothetically people may often strive to find a "soul mate" who elicits the perception that their union possesses sacred qualities or involves God's intentions or actions. The sanctification of parenthood may likewise intensify adults' efforts to do whatever is necessary to form a divine parent–child relationship. When a sacred family relationship appears possible, people may more often form a commitment to a partner or child and invest resources to firmly establish their bond.

Maintenance stage. Growing evidence supports the finding that viewing a family relationship as sanctified helps to maintain the quality of the formed bond. For example, in surveys of national and community samples of generally happily married couples, greater sanctification of marriage predicts less marital conflict and greater marital satisfaction and commitment after controlling for demographics, spouses' general religiousness, and unmeasured characteristics (i.e., fixed-effects modeling) of couples' relationships (DeMaris, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2010; Ellison, Henderson, Glenn, & Harkrider, 2011; Lichter & Carmalt, 2009; Mahoney et al., 1999). Perceiving sexual relations with a partner as sanctified also covaries strongly with greater sexual satisfaction among newlyweds (Hernandez,

Mahoney, & Pargament, 2011) and unmarried college students involved in "loving relationships" (N. A. Murray-Swank, Pargament, & Mahoney, 2005). Furthermore, although newlyweds are less prone to appraise their sex lives as connected to God or marked by sacred qualities than the marriage as a whole, viewing marital sexuality as sacred robustly predicts sexual and marital quality longitudinally (Hernandez & Mahoney, 2012). Finally, greater similarity between spouses on sanctity of marriage predicts marital quality beyond the impact of the degree that each spouse personally views their marriage in a sacred light (Lichter & Carmalt, 2009).

When it comes to parent–child relationships, wide variation exists within and across religious subcultures about the goal of fostering children's obedience versus autonomy and the disciplinary method of spanking (Ellison & Bradshaw, 2008), but a broad agreement exists that parents should be affectionate and devoted to their children (Onedera, 2008). Thus, greater sanctity of parenting may translate into differing patterns of parenting depending on how people construe spiritually responsible parental goals and methods. For example, an initial study found that greater sanctification of parenting was tied to more spanking and positive interactions with their children when mothers interpreted the Bible literally (A. Murray-Swank, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2006). In contrast, greater sanctification was tied to less spanking and did not alter relatively high levels of positive mother–child interactions for mothers with more liberal views of the Bible. For all mothers, sanctification related to less verbal hostility and more consistency in parenting. In another initial, small-scale study, greater sanctification of parenting related to greater use of positive strategies by mothers and fathers (e.g., praise, induction) to elicit young children's moral conduct (Volling, Mahoney, & Rauer, 2009). Finally, parents from a low-income, urban setting who reported greater sanctification of parenting also reported greater investment of effort to care for their children but not parental satisfaction or efficacy (Dumas & Nissley-Tsiopinis, 2006). Overall, viewing parenting as a sacred mission seems to strengthen parents' pursuit of their parenting goals and their reliance on their preferred childrearing methods, but more studies are needed to confirm this conclusion.

In addition to having spiritual cognitions about a given family bond, family members can behaviorally integrate spirituality into their relationships by participating in spiritually focused activities together. Numerous studies have found that similarity in spouses' attendance at religious services predicts marital quality better than either spouse's own attendance (Mahoney, 2010; Mahoney et al., 2001). Furthermore, the more couples say they engage in spiritual activities together, the better marital interaction patterns they report (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001; Lichter & Carmalt, 2008; Mahoney et al., 1999). Yet one could argue that any ritualistic or recreational activity that family members share in common could facilitate relational quality. Thus, studies are needed that target ways people overtly engage in unique spiritual activities together that may enhance their relationships. Two such examples of constructs that tap into behavioral manifestations of dyadic spirituality that could be witnessed by others (e.g., children, researchers) are highlighted next.

First, Brelsford and Mahoney (2008) examined the extent to which mothers and college students attending a Midwestern state university reported they candidly discussed their spiritual journeys, questions, and doubts with one another, a construct labeled "spiritual disclosure." Greater dialogue about spiritual matters was associated with greater use of collaborative methods to resolve conflict, even controlling for the degree to which the pair discussed other sensitive topics and each party reported religion or spirituality to be personally important. Second, Brelsford and Mahoney (2009) examined the extent to which mothers and college students suggested to one another that they rely on God and spirituality as a mediator during conflictual interactions, a construct labeled here as "spiritual mediation" (this construct was previously labeled "theistic mediation" but was assessed with both theistic and nontheistic items). More specifically, both family members reported the degree that each party openly suggested the pair call on God and spirituality to help them listen to one another, remain calm and nondefensive, and use compromise or collaboration when discussing conflicts. Greater levels of theistic meditation were related to fewer conflicts, higher levels of relationship satisfaction, and more adaptive communication strategies.

This section has showcased initial findings on a few possible mechanisms for which researchers assessed cognitions or behaviors that infused family relationships with spiritual properties. In moving forward to replicate and expand this body of research, investigators need to identify spiritual mechanisms likely to apply to traditional and non-traditional families. For example, two initial qualitative studies revealed that same-sex couples, like heterosexual couples, often believe that their union possesses divine, transcendent qualities (Rostosky, Riggle, Brodnicki, & Olson, 2008) and are similar in intrinsic religiosity (i.e., depth and salience of internal religiousness), with both factors predicting greater relationship satisfaction (Rostosky, Otis, Riggle, Kelly, & Brodnicki, 2008); however, unlike heterosexual couples, same-sex couples rarely talk about calling on God as a third party to help them sustain their union, and similarity in religious attendance or activities was not related to relationship happiness. This pattern of findings suggests that some spiritual mechanisms, such as sanctification and spiritual disclosure, may apply to diverse types of couples and families. Other spiritual mechanisms, however, may play a prevalent role in subsamples in which family members mutually experience God as an invisible but active "person" in their family system. Theistic meditation represents this type of construct. Overall, more empirical work needs to uncover specific spiritual processes that help people maintain their chosen family bonds.

Transformation stage. When families face serious family crises or dysfunction, they may tap into unrealized or new perspectives about the spiritual nature of their bonds to help them adaptively rework family structure and processes. Again, systematic empirical research on such change processes needs to be conducted. Hypothetically, people could draw on spiritual beliefs or behaviors centered on family life to help them transform their family when a member ceases to fulfill an established family function. Consider, for example, a heterosexual couple who marry, agreeing that their family structure will embody their respective spiritual callings in life by him earning money in the labor market to support the family and her working as a stay-at-home

mother. What happens, however, if he becomes unemployable and disabled because of a medical or mental illness? Faced with the challenge of altering their martial roles, the couple might unite around the superordinate goal of family stability. By sanctifying this goal, they may better adjust to the wife becoming the primary wage earner. Alternatively, when a family member violates normative expectations about how to treat another family member, such as acting out sexually or aggressively, family members may reflect more deeply on family dynamics that match their spiritual values; such deliberations may facilitate confrontation and confession, and forgiveness and repentance as people strive to keep their family intact, but they may radically change their relational processes to maintain their relationships.

Tier 2 Struggles: Spiritual Family Relationship as a Struggle

Discovery stage. Social science studies on faith and family life have been dominated by the conceptual lens of "religious familism," a term that refers to the ideology that the family is the central unit of social order and should be governed by certain religious imperatives (Edgell, 2005; Wilcox, 2006). Sociological work on religious familism in the United States has highlighted ways that mainline religions, particularly conservative branches of U.S. Protestantism, have promoted certain norms about family structure. Namely, traditional religious doctrines idealize and reinforce American, middle-class, and mid-20th-century views of "the good family" as being composed of married heterosexuals who bear and raise biological children (Browning & Clairmont, 2006; Edgell, 2005). In response, researchers have sought to determine whether public involvement in organized religion is related to the higher likelihood of men and women getting married, women giving birth, and heterosexuals fulfilling traditional roles as husbands and wives in a family. Yet researchers have left largely untouched the spiritual dilemmas that people face if they are unable to create traditional or untraditional family relationships. Because I was unable to locate empirical studies focused on spiritual struggles

triggered by difficulties in forming family relationships, I illustrate the need for such work by discussing infertility.

For centuries, traditional doctrines across major world religions have held that procreation and thus sexual intercourse should occur only between a married man and woman (Browning & Clairmont, 2006; Ruether, 2000). In turn, the conception and birth of a biological child has been portrayed as a living, spiritual symbol of marital love. Thus, many people may implicitly or explicitly assume that conceiving children via sexual intercourse is inherent to creating a spiritual family unit. Indeed, 78% of husbands and 84% of wives from a region in the U.S. Midwest perceived their first pregnancy to be a manifestation of God and marked by sacred qualities to some degree (Mahoney, Pargament, & DeMaris, 2009). Notably, these married couples attended religious services at rates similar to other married U.S. couples with children, implying that many people may feel spiritually called to have biological children with a spouse. The experience of infertility obviously blocks this goal, raising complex questions. Infertile couples may struggle with the traditional concepts that (a) biological relatedness is necessary or sufficient to define a parent–child bond as sacred, or (b) "natural" methods are spiritually superior to "non-natural" routes to establish parenthood, such as assisted reproductive technology and surrogate birth mothers, or the adoption of donor eggs, sperm, embryos, or children. Same-sex couples or unmarried individuals who desire parent–child relationships may wrestle with choices brought about by technology that conflict with their assumptions on the spiritually ideal way to form family bonds. Prior research on negative spiritual coping with nonfamilial issues would predict that spiritual struggles with infertility as well as other roadblocks to forming family relationships could intensify individual and relational distress, but studies are needed to confirm such predictions. Hopefully, the next decade will usher in such work.

Maintenance stage. Whereas open-minded spiritual dialogues and shared spiritual activities seem to sustain harmonious family processes, spiritual struggles between family members appear

to produce the opposite effect. Before reviewing such evidence, it must be emphasized that serious intrafamilial disputes focused on faith are the exception, not the rule. For example, religion falls near the bottom of topics that newlyweds report cause marital arguments (Oggins, 2003). Nevertheless, because spirituality can deeply anchor one's priorities in life, including family goals, and shape the pursuit of these ends (Mahoney, 2005), spiritually grounded clashes may be especially destructive, even if infrequent. This paradox is evident in sociological research on domestic violence and marital conflict. On one hand, higher religious attendance substantially decreases the risk of being the victim or perpetrator of domestic violence in dating, cohabiting, and marital unions (Mahoney, 2010), and spouses' personal involvement in religion neither increases nor decreases the frequency of marital conflicts (Mahoney et al., 2001). On the other hand, the small fraction of married couples (around 8%) who display major discrepancies in their interpretation of the Bible are far more likely to argue with each other (Curtis & Ellison, 2002) and to report that husbands are physically aggressive toward their wives (Ellison, Bartkowski, & Anderson, 1999) than couples who have similar Biblical attitudes. Although it also rarely occurs, conflict between parents over religion predicts greater child maladjustment (Bartkowski, Xu, & Levin, 2008), implying that spiritual struggles between spouses can escalate coparenting conflict and ineffective parenting.

Marked dissimilarity between parents and adolescents on global religious variables, such as religious attendance or importance of religion, are also atypical, but this dissimilarity decreases satisfaction with the relationship (Mahoney, 2010). Qualitative observations also reveal that highly religiously parents who dispense heavy-handed lectures, rather than taking an open-minded approach during spiritual discussions with teens, unwittingly alienate their adolescents (Dollahite & Thatcher, 2008). Finally, in an initial quantitative study on dyadic spiritual struggles in a family context, Brelsford and Mahoney (2009) examined the extent to which mothers and college students openly aligned with

God and spirituality against the other party during conflicts, a construct labeled here as "spiritual one-upmanship" (the construct was previously labeled "theistic triangulation" but was assessed with both theistic and nontheistic items). Specifically, both family members reported the degree to which each overtly suggested their position was spirituality superior and backed up by God's support. As expected, greater spiritual one-upmanship was related to less satisfaction with the relationship and more use of verbal hostility and stonewalling during disputes. Although more studies are needed, these findings highlight maladaptive ways family members can pull spirituality into marital and parent–adolescent interactions.

Another key direction for future research is to identify unique spiritual mechanisms that sustain excessively rigid or harsh parenting of children. Critics of corporal punishment have argued that parents may lean on certain Bible passages to defend physically abusive parenting (Rodriguez & Henderson, 2010). Parenthetically, the more that parents from a broad array of Christian denominations endorse orthodox attitudes about the Bible, God's role in their lives, and the authority of their religious community, the more they value child obedience and conformity (Mahoney et al., 2001). Yet the hypothesis that highly devout Christian parents are more likely than other parents to justify physically abusive acts on spiritual grounds has not been verified. The closest study to date examined links between religious orientation and the risk of physical child abuse on the basis of responses to the Child Abuse Potential Inventory (CAPI) by 207 regularly attending Christians across the spectrum of liberal to conservative denominations (Rodriguez & Henderson, 2010). The more respondents indicated that they used religion for self-serving and instrumental purposes (i.e., extrinsic orientation), the higher their CAPI scores, a link exacerbated by greater social conformity. But the degree to which religion was well integrated into participants' identities and pursued for its own sake (i.e., intrinsic orientation) was unrelated to their CAPI scores. Dyslin and Thomsen (2005) found the same results for college students' risk of abusing hypothetical offspring. Furthermore, a longitudinal study found that frequent

religious attendance by U.S. parents markedly decreased, not increased, the incidence of physical abuse substantiated by the child protective system (Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Salzinger, 1998). Also, in low-income and minority families, greater religious attendance and importance of spirituality to single mothers correlates with less risk of child maltreatment (e.g., Carothers, Borkowski, Lefever, & Whitman, 2005). Thus, despite the finding that U.S. parents who belong to conservative Christian groups or interpret the Bible literally are more likely to spank children than other parents (Mahoney, 2010; Mahoney et al., 2001), adults who take their chosen faith seriously appear to be less likely to be physically abusive toward children than other adults. Yet a minority of parents may exploit certain spiritual beliefs about parenting to justify child maltreatment, a possibility underscored by 21% of U.S. Midwestern college students who had a history of physical maltreatment, recalling the perpetrator had used spiritual rationales to justify their conduct (Bottoms, Nielsen, Murray, & Filipas, 2004). Clearly, more research is needed to identify specific spiritual beliefs about parenting that perpetuate and discourage physical maltreatment of youth.

Transformation stage.   In this section, I discuss emerging evidence that family crises or dysfunction can be interpreted in a negative spiritual light that exacerbates peoples' suffering over family difficulties. I highlight three constructs that reflect the danger of investing family structures or processes with either divine or demonic significance: sacred loss, desecration, and demonization. Recent studies on postdivorce adjustment illustrates that all three spiritual mechanisms appear to intensify personal and relational distress when relationships break down.

Sacred loss and desecration involve spiritual cognitions that an event has injured an aspect of life thought to embody sacred qualities or God's presence (Pargament, Magyar, Benore, & Mahoney, 2005). A divorce, for example, could be appraised as an event that causes a marriage to fall from the sacred realm. Sacred loss appraisals focus on a sense of sacred loss, such as "Something I held as sacred is no longer present in my life," or "I lost something I thought God wanted for me." Desecration appraisals focus on a sense of intentional violation or harm of a sacred object, such as "Something that was sacred to me was destroyed" or "A part of my life that God made sacred was attacked." In an initial study on spiritual coping with divorce with adults from the Midwest, three quarters of respondents endorsed such negative spiritual appraisals about their recent divorce even though they, like other divorcees, were less religiously or spiritually engaged than the general U.S. population (Krumrei et al., 2009, 2011b). About one third of college students at a Midwestern state university also endorsed these negative spiritual beliefs about their parents' divorce (Warner et al., 2009). Furthermore, the two appraisals were essentially fused together for divorcees and children of divorce (correlated around .90). Thus, the more family members viewed a divorce as a sacred loss, the more they also viewed the divorce as a violation of sacred vows. In contrast, in a study of a wide range of negative life events, sacred loss and desecration cognitions were uncorrelated (Pargament et al., 2005). Thus, life stressors that tend to be viewed as beyond human control (e.g., natural disasters, accidents, illness) often may be perceived as a sacred loss without attributions of spiritual culpability, whereas divorce typically may be seen as a spiritual loss due to human culpability. Furthermore, these two negative spiritual appraisals were not found to have a psychosocial "upside" for postdivorce adjustment, whereas sacred loss triggered by diverse stressors was tied to greater personal growth. For example, the more divorcees viewed their divorce as a sacred loss and desecration, the more depression and dysfunctional conflict tactics with the ex-spouse they reported longitudinally, even after accounting for typically helpful nonspiritual and spiritual coping strategies (Krumrei et al., 2011b). Likewise, college students who retrospectively recalled experiencing their parental divorce as a spiritual loss and desecration reported greater current personal and family-related distress (Warner et al., 2009).

Demonization refers to interpreting someone or something as being controlled by destructive powers of a transcendental nature (Krumrei, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2011b; Pargament, 1997). More specifically, a demonic appraisal is the belief that the devil or demonic forces directly or indirectly caused an

event. Such beliefs offer a means to understand suffering while conserving the belief in a just world or benevolent God. In the case of Krumrie et al.'s (2011a) study of 100 divorcees, 48% viewed their divorce as demonic in one or more of the following three ways: demonized the divorce itself (36%), believed their ex-spouse was operating under demonic influences (43%), and viewed themselves as under the control of demonic forces (31%). Greater anger and posttraumatic anxiety symptoms, such as intrusive negative thoughts and avoidance, covaried with all three forms of demonization. Greater depression was also associated with greater demonization of the divorce or oneself.

Taken together, these initial findings indicate that family difficulties can deeply threaten peoples' assumptions about the sanctity of family relationships. Thus, paradoxically, to the degree that people invest family relationships with spiritual properties, they may incur added costs when these relationships go awry. Far more research is needed to understand the spiritual struggles that people face if they are challenged to reform family dynamics that transgress their spiritual values or to let go entirely of bonds they once held sacred. One important line of future research revolves around distressed couples' perceptions that a partner has desecrated their relationship by engaging in serious wrongdoing, such as infidelity, domestic violence, compulsive gambling or spending, or pornography addiction. Another critical line of research involves how parents and children manage their relationships when any family member engages in behavior that deeply contradicts the stated spiritual virtues that their relationships should embody, such as parents neglecting or maltreating their children, or children treating parents in ways the parents view as reprehensible.

TIER 3: RELATIONSHIP WITH A RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY IN THE SEARCH FOR FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Tier 3: Overview
The third tier in the relational spirituality framework addresses family member(s) relationships with religious communities. Religious communities may support or reject the spiritual cognitions or behav-

iors that people use to discover, maintain, and transform their family relationships. In turn, individuals may be attracted or repelled by various religious subgroups' views of their family, and thus may experience a religious community as an added source of support or strain on the basis of the goodness of fit between the respective parties' approach to family life. In addition, people who deviate from familial norms advocated by their religious group may more often experience spiritual struggles that intensify family-related distress and jeopardize access to spiritual resources to strengthen their families. People embedded in a religious network that affirms their family choices, however, may more readily draw on spirituality as a resource to form and sustain their families. Thus, although people may rely strictly on private efforts to build a relationship with God or invest their family relationships with spiritual properties, religious communities constitute public social groups that are uniquely positioned to reinforce the spiritual mechanisms already discussed in this chapter. Religious groups can also offer families socially based spiritual resources and struggles that have no direct parallels in secular organizations. Before elaborating, three broad cultural issues pertinent to Tier 3 need recognition not addressed in the discussions of Tier 1 or Tier 2.

Three Cultural Considerations
Although religious groups may endorse norms for family life that fall anywhere along the continuum of progressive to conservative social values for family life also advocated by civic or political organizations (e.g., pro- or antigay marriage), a unique value that diverse religious groups share is to help people integrate spirituality into daily life. In short, religious communities represent a distinctive public context in which family members are likely to be exposed to and encouraged to adopt various spiritual cognitions and behaviors about family life. These include the spiritual processes covered in this chapter, such as benevolent prayer, sanctification, or sacred loss–desecration. As sociologists have emphasized, however, religious groups can serve nonspiritual, social functions that other well-organized and well-funded community organizations could provide to families. These generic social functions include heightening

the family's integration into their broader culture; providing structured opportunities to invest time in family activities, alongside families with similar values; and aiding in the socialization of children (Edgell, 2005, Wilcox, 2006). Of course, people may often interpret seemingly secular functions served by religious communities as spiritual. For example, a "secular" marital education program or parent support group delivered in a religious setting may be perceived by participants as a "blessing." Furthermore, qualitative studies of couples and single parents often indicate that religious groups simultaneously fulfill spiritual and nonspiritual functions (e.g., Goodman & Dollahite, 2006; Sparks et al., 2005). Thus, attending religious services may reinforce adaptive spiritual beliefs or behaviors (e.g., prayer for partner) as well as humanistic virtues widely promoted by religious and secular groups as being helpful to family relationships (e.g., compassionate love, forgiveness). To date, however, quantitative studies that have attempted to assess the role of religious communities for family life have relied heavily on global markers, such as religious affiliation or attendance rates. Such single-item measures confound the spiritual and nonspiritual functions that religious groups may serve, making it difficult to untangle and appreciate these distinctive, but co-occurring, roles that religious communities can serve for family life.

Second, the extent to which religious communities help or hinder family life rests in the eye of the beholder and the particular aspect of family life under consideration. The differentiation of the three stages of family relationships in the relational spirituality framework illuminates points of division and consensus across religious communities. In broad strokes, issues related to the discovery and transformation of family relationships tend to generate religiously based conflict, whereas diverse religious subgroups tend to agree about the ideal ways to maintain family bonds. Regarding the discovery stage, as noted, debates exist in religious circles about bestowing equal spiritual status to the intentional formation of traditional and nontraditional families. For the stage of maintenance, however, religious (and secular) subgroups tend to speak in one voice about the desirability of sustaining

healthy family relationships and the optimal pathways to reach this goal, such as being loving, selfless, forgiving, faithful, and honest in kinship circles. In short, broad cultural consensus tends to exist about the virtues that ideally should permeate family bonds so they endure. Yet opinion again differs widely within and across religious subgroups about the transformation stage and defensible grounds to reform or exit distressed relationships. For instance, some theologians argue that believers who ground their ultimate sense of significance in a secure relationship with God should demand change or sever family relationships that are dysfunctional, rather than enable their own mistreatment (Ruether, 2001). Others point out the need for greater effort and self-sacrifice to sustain family bonds (Browning & Clairmont, 2006), as evidenced by nontrivial rates of divorce by Catholics (28%), Protestants (34%), and "born again" Christians (33%; Barna Group, 2009). The dilemma that religious groups face is determining when justice is best served by insisting a marriage can be saved or by supporting all family members when an irreparably damaged marriage ends.

Third, religious institutions face obvious challenges in responding to the growing pluralism of family structures in modern societies. Some social scientists postulate that religious institutions will survive in the 21st century to the degree they defend and support nuclear families who most often engage in communal worship (Wilcox, 2006). For example, 56% of married parents with children attend religious services two to three times per month compared with 39% of single mothers or 39% of cohabiting couples with children (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012). Other scholars predict that religious institutions will thrive to the degree they increase their affirmation and outreach to the rising number of nontraditional families (Edgell, 2005). In the United States, for example, in the 1960s, 91% of U.S. minors lived with married, biological parents; this rate dropped to 69% by 2009, with 27% of minors living with single parents, 10% with married stepparents, and 9% with cohabiting couples or nonparental caregivers (Kreider & Ellis, 2011, Figure 6, p. 9). Yet 77% of single mothers and 78% of cohabiting couples report that religion is

"somewhat" or "very important" to their daily life, compared with 89% of married parents (U.S. National Survey of Family Growth, 2006–2008). Thus many people in traditional and nontraditional families appear to value something that religion offers. The unanswered question is "what is it?"

Tier 3 Resources: Relationship With a Religious Community as a Resource

Discovery stage. Scarce research has addressed specific ways that people may draw support from religious communities to form family relationships. The need for such research is illustrated by inconclusive evidence that heterosexuals rely on their religious community to help structure their roles in marriage (Edgell, 2005; Hernandez & Mahoney, 2012). Conceptually, researchers have highlighted alternative Christian models that may influence marital roles. A complementary model holds that God intends for men and women to hold distinct, traditional roles in the family. In its most extreme form, men are assigned the role of sole breadwinner who holds authority over family decisions. In turn, women are ascribed the role of full-time homemaker, particularly after children are born. A contrasting model of egalitarianism in Christian circles argues that husbands and wives should hold equal authority in family life, divide domestic labor evenly, and mutually pursue paid labor. Hypothetically, people would be more likely to create family systems consistent with their religious group's stance on this complementary–egalitarian continuum.

Yet empirical evidence, on the basis of national surveys of religious denomination and attendance as well as qualitative interviews of religious subgroups, reveals a far more complex picture of religion and *attitudes* about gender relations in families than implied by these two polarized models (Edgell, 2005). Muslims and conservative Christian Protestants living in the United States hold far more diverse and flexible attitudes about feminism, women's labor market participation, and familial hierarchy than implied by conservative religious teachings (Edgell, 2005; Hernandez & Mahoney, 2012). Even more telling are studies focused on *behavioral* indexes of gender roles that find virtually no differences in how married Christians who

belong to liberal versus conservative denominations manage decision making or divide household labor (Mahoney, 2010). Greater religious attendance, Biblical conservatism, and sanctification of parent–infant relationships, however, are associated with married couples adopting a traditional division of labor in daily infant care tasks after the transition to parenthood (DeMaris, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2011). Yet, recent qualitative research has found that working Christian mothers who view their career as a sacred endeavor blessed by God feel less strain in juggling conflicting work–domestic roles (e.g., Oates, Hall, & Anderson, 2005).

More research is needed to clarify the extent to which diverse religious communities shape the formation and structure of diverse family units and reinforce related spiritual beliefs or practices. One initial study found that same-sex couples who were more involved in their religious community were more likely to hold a public commitment ceremony and take legal steps to form a committed union (Oswald, Goldberg, Kuvalanka, & Clausell, 2008). Thus, involvement in religious communities may facilitate peoples' pursuit of conventional or unconventional family relationships by offering people unique public rituals to solidify their family bonds and infuse them with spiritual significance (e.g., religious wedding and baby-naming ceremonies). Religious groups may help people locate partners who hold a similar spiritual vision of adult unions as well as facilitate shared spirituality between parents and children, which, in turn, may increase their mutual commitment to their family relationships.

Maintenance stage. In qualitative studies of highly religious and married heterosexuals with children, couples from diverse religious traditions report that involvement in their religious communities increases their belief that their marriage has spiritual purposes and their level of engagement in family spiritual activities at home (Dollahite & Marks, 2009; Goodman & Dollahite, 2006). Consistent with these findings, greater general religiousness modestly correlates with the helpful specific spiritual mechanisms reviewed in Tier 1 and Tier 2, including benevolent prayer for

partner (Fincham et al., 2008); the sanctification of marriage (e.g., Mahoney et al., 1999), cohabiting unions (Henderson et al., 2010), marital sexuality (Hernandez et al., 2011), and parenting (A. Murray-Swank et al., 2006); and theistic meditation (Brelsford & Mahoney, 2009). Thus, not surprisingly, greater involvement in religious groups appears to facilitate specific spiritual cognitions or behaviors about family life that are associated with better family functioning. Yet studies are needed that spell out direct and mediated pathways of influence between involvement in religious communities and specific spiritual mechanisms for family outcomes. More research is also needed to pinpoint ways that religious groups may motivate family members to adopt virtues that could help them sustain their bonds, such as compassionate love, sacrifice, gratitude, forgiveness, acceptance, and sexual fidelity.

Furthermore, research is needed to identify spiritual mechanisms that, by definition, involve social processes via religious groups that people are unlikely to experience in other social contexts. Possible examples include family members looking up to members of a religious community for inspiration or aid to form or maintain family ties (e.g., spiritual role models; see Chapter 10 in this volume), having spiritually intimate dialogues with fellow believers about family issues, and engaging in joint prayer with or soliciting benevolent prayers from others. In addition, research is needed that clarifies ways that religious organizations may enhance the impact of family-oriented prevention or intervention programs that religious groups offer to their members and other families in their communities. For example, although religious organizations routinely offer premarital, marital, and parenting education programs, little controlled research appears to have evaluated the penetration rates, efficacy, or effectiveness of "church-based" programs, and whether these programs capitalize on participants' spirituality to enhance outcomes. Initial work on integrating prayer for partner into standard marital educational programs illustrates the potential value of augmenting a "secular" marital program with spiritual activities (see Volume 2, Chapter 24, this handbook). Tremendous potential remains for similar collaborative efforts between religious communities and family

experts that productively taps into spiritual resources in a respectful and scientifically rigorous manner to strengthen diverse families.

Transformation stage.   Ideally, religious leaders and communities could help families confront and recover effectively from serious family problems. Some surveys suggest that people more often turn to clergy for help with marital or family issues than to mental health professionals (Chalfant et al., 1990). Yet clergy often report that couples wait too long before they seek help and they feel unequipped to handle the severity of many problems presented to them (see Volume 2, Chapter 9, this handbook). Qualitative research on victims of domestic violence suggests that women can gain support from their community either to leave or to reconcile with an abusive spouse (Nason-Clark, 1997; Yick, 2008). Yet systematic or controlled studies could not be located that have examined the success of interventions carried out by or in collaboration with religious groups for distressed or clinic-referred couples or families. Hopefully, more in-depth collaborative efforts will develop between religious groups and family intervention specialists to intervene with and generate positive outcomes for distressed families.

Tier 3 Struggles: Relationship With a Religious Community as a Struggle
Discovery stage.   Hypothetically, individuals who violate the norms of their religious community to establish an adult union or parent–child bond may be at greater risk to experience spiritually based conflicts with their religious community. Yet systematic research is needed to uncover the struggles that people encounter with religious communities over their choices to form family ties and how such conflicts may undermine peoples' efforts to establish stable relationships with partners or offspring. For example, although a growing body of research shows that homosexuals who feel rejected by their religious communities report greater psychological distress (see Chapter 34 in this volume), it is unclear whether such struggles undermine their desire or ability to establish a committed relationship with a partner. Similarly, scarce research exists on the prevalence or implications of struggles that

people encounter with religious networks when they do not form a traditional family because of infertility or nonmarital births. Little also appears to be known empirically about the impact of feeling judged by or upset with religious leaders or fellow believers who may view a prospective union as spiritually subpar because the fiancé is from a different faith tradition (i.e., interfaith marriages) or because of either partner's history of premarital sexuality, cohabitation, nonmarital birth, or divorce. In all of these instances, people may turn away or be turned away from engaging in public religious rituals to solidify their family bonds (see Volume 2, Chapter 9, this handbook). In turn, they may be more likely to view family ties as strictly private matters; dismiss any potential "added value" of solidifying a family unit by getting married before cohabiting or conceiving a child; and reject organized religion as a resource that could facilitate the helpful spiritual mechanisms highlighted previously in Tier 1, Tier 2, or Tier 3.

Maintenance stage.   Although spiritual communities ideally could help families access helpful spiritual and nonspiritual resources to sustain healthy family dynamics, these communities could function in the reverse manner by reinforcing harmful spiritual mechanisms highlighted in Tier 1 and Tier 2. Again, however, scarce systematic research has examined the prevalence or implications of family members' turning to members of their religious communities in ways that maintain negative spiritual processes or family dynamics. Although it is well established that family dyads who report dissimilar rates of religious attendance tend to report poorer relational quality (Mahoney, 2010; Mahoney et al., 2001), more research needs to clarify why this may be the case. For example, a married individual may turn to a clergy member or fellow believer for support to tolerate an excessively domineering spouse, which, in turn, might fuel unhealthy power imbalances in the union. Alternatively, a spouse may align with members of a religious community in a judgmental manner against a spouse who holds more liberal or conservative views of family life, which could escalate conflict between the spouses. Similarly, parents may counterproductively triangulate religious groups

into conflict with adolescents who explore or develop an identity that triggers parental anxiety. Parents from religious groups with highly conservative social values, for example, may worry their teens will adopt excessively permissive attitudes or actions about media, sexuality, or alcohol use because of their exposure to more liberal peer groups. Conversely, parents committed to religious groups with liberal social values (as well as parents who eschew organized religion entirely) may fear that their teens will become excessively intolerant or exclusionary as a result of closer involvement with conservative peers. Parents who try to draw on religious communities with conservative or liberal ideology to back up their own position may escalate conflict between themselves and their teens and inadvertently push their teens to differentiate their identities in ways that are even more out of line with the parents' (and teen's) faith. Hopefully, more fine-grained empirical work will be conducted to identify specific ways that religious communities may escalate distance or hostility within families.

Transformation stage.   People may encounter a variety of spiritual struggles with religious communities when their family relationships seriously go awry. These struggles, in turn, could compromise family members' effective coping. For example, one or more family members may feel spiritual shame about family dysfunction in the eyes of their religious community and harbor fears of being stigmatized, rejected, or judged by their spiritual group. To be protected from such social criticism, a family member may disclose problems to trusted members of their religious group to form alliances with them against other family members. Such triangulation processes may escalate counterproductive cycles of blame and hostility between family members, particularly if religious leaders or fellow believers take sides. Alternatively, family members and religious communities may mutually engage in a "don't ask, don't tell" pattern when dysfunction occurs within family systems, which cuts off families from spiritual and nonspiritual resources that religious communities could offer to help them confront and cope adaptively with serious family

issues. Limited in-depth research has investigated these possibilities in distressed subsamples of families. Studies on divorce, however, highlight a tendency toward silence and distance between family members and religious communities when family systems break down. For example, in a national survey of young adults whose parents had divorced, only 25% reported that anyone from their religious community had ever talked to them about the divorce (Marquardt, 2005). Interestingly, older adolescents whose parents divorce are more likely to transition from being "religious and spiritual" to "spiritual but not religious" (Zhai, Ellison, Stokes, & Glenn, 2008). They also decrease their religious attendance but say they feel equally close to God compared with peers from maritally intact families (Zhai, Ellison, Glenn, & Marquardt, 2007). These findings highlight that family difficulties may create a wedge between families and religious community, even as people privately seek support from God to cope.

SUMMARY: INTEGRATION AND RECIPROCITY

In this chapter, I have illustrated three tiers of spiritual beliefs and practices that may help or harm family relationships. Hopefully, researchers and clinicians will be inspired to delve into these mechanisms. These three tiers of mechanisms often may be tightly interwoven, with people experiencing little dissonance in their connections to God, family members, and their religious community. For example, individuals who hold traditional theistic views of God and favor family units headed by married heterosexuals with children may readily find support in socially conservative religious groups that promote marriage and parenthood relatively early in life. Such people may pray alone, with their spouse, and with their religious community to facilitate their efforts to form and maintain a traditional family. A parallel case of integration could be made for individuals who pursue nontraditional searches for both spirituality and family life. The differentiation of the three tiers, however, shines light on debilitating spiritual struggles that people could face in their search for family bonds. For example, those raised

in socially conservative religious groups may experience painful spiritual conflicts internally, with God, or with others if they pursue unconventional family bonds. Likewise, those raised with no or loose ties to a religious group may struggle to establish or maintain belief in the sanctity of any type of family unit and may have less access to spiritual practices to strengthen their family. Thus, the stages of discovery and maintenance most likely shape each other across the unfolding of the family life cycle, as people adjust their family structure and processes to accommodate the developmental needs of all family members. Presumably, spirituality could help people cope with the continual challenges to balance firmness versus flexibility in their family structure, and warmth versus control within and across family subsystems over time. Yet spirituality could also trigger or intensify family crises or dysfunction that emerge. Hopefully this chapter will spur further investigation of people's efforts, for better or worse, to integrate all three tiers of spiritual resources across all three stages of family life.

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