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Questions Left Unaddressed by Religious Familism: Is Spirituality Relevant to Nontraditional Families?

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Abstract

Given the growing pluralism in family structures, this chapter highlights the role of religion and spirituality in the formation and maintenance of diverse types of families. We outline commonalities and differences that exist among major world religions about forming and maintaining family relationships. Consistent with the predominant conceptual model called *religious familism*, most research on faith and family life focuses on traditional families (i.e., married heterosexual couples with biological children). We summarize findings on these families that largely assess spirituality indirectly via markers of religious participation (e.g., religious affiliation, attendance, salience). We then review in more detail research on spirituality within nontraditional families, focusing on families comprised of cohabitating couples, same-sex couples, and single parenthood because these nontraditional families have received the most, albeit limited, empirical attention. Given evidence of the interdependence of religion and traditional family forms, research is needed to determine the relevance of spirituality for nontraditional families.

Key Words: cohabitation, couples, homosexuality, family, marriage, parenting, religion, same-sex couples, spirituality

Introduction

The idealized vision of *family* in mid-20th century America consisted of an employed father married to a stay-at-home mother caring for the couple's biological children (described by Smith, 1993, as the standard North American family). Demographically, the prevalence of this *traditional* family formation peaked in the United States in the 1950s at 43% of all households (Edgell, 2006), since which time there has been growing pluralism in family structures. For example, whereas the 1960s saw 91% of American minors living with married, biological parents, this rate dropped to 60% of minors by 2009, with 26% of minors living with single parents, 6% with married stepparents, and 8% with cohabiting couples or nonparental caregivers (US Census Bureau, 2009). Furthermore, 62% of US women in the late 1990s reported they had cohabited with a partner prior to

marriage (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008), and up to 65% of children are expected to spend part of their childhood living with an unmarried couple due to nonmarital births among cohabiting couples or nonmarital unions following divorce (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). Obviously, a traditional family life cycle of heterosexuals getting married prior to cohabitation and first-time pregnancy, with the union ending by death, is declining in the United States.

The traditional family formation emerged in America partly under the influence of Christianity (Edgell, 2006; Ruether, 2000). Sociological discussion about religion and family often focuses on ways these two institutions have been interdependent. The term *religious familism* refers to the ideology that the family is the central unit of social order and should be governed by certain religious imperatives (Edgell, 2006; Edgell & Docka, 2007; Wilcox,

2004). Religious familism in the United States has valued certain forms of the family above others, emphasizing stable heterosexual marriages that produce children and exclude nonmarital sex (Edgell & Docka, 2007). Perhaps as a result, little research has examined the role of religion and spirituality within nontraditional families, leaving many unanswered questions about what influence, if any, spirituality plays within the growing number of these families.

In this chapter, we spotlight a central paradox regarding spirituality and family life. Namely, considerable theological dissension exists within and across religious subcultures about moral norms regarding family structure, whereas consensus tends to exist across religions about how family members should act to maintain family relationships after they are formed. In exploring this distinction between family structure and family process when it comes to commonalities and differences in major world religions, we draw on the conceptual framework of *relational spirituality* (Mahoney, 2010). The vast majority of empirical research on religion and family has focused on traditional families, and we briefly summarize relevant findings. In addition, we highlight the largely unstudied possibility that people in nontraditional families may also find spirituality relevant to their home life. For example, one qualitative study with same-sex couples from the southern United States found that nearly all viewed their union as having spiritual significance and meaning (Rostosky, Riggle, Brodnicki, & Olson, 2008), a finding consistent with the high religious attendance and prayer rates of US sexual minorities (Sherkat, 2002). To facilitate more research on diverse families, we showcase findings and unaddressed questions about spirituality in the formation and maintenance of relationships among three types of nontraditional families that have received the most, albeit limited, empirical attention: cohabitating heterosexual couples, same-sex couples, and single parents.

Conceptual Issues in the Scientific Study of the Interface of Family and Religion-Spirituality

Conceptualizing Family

The traditional family model in Western societies has been facilitated through a wide range of institutional, legal, and economic arrangements, not the least of which has been its legitimization by religious authority (Edgell & Docka, 2007). Nevertheless, diversity in family forms has existed historically and globally (Stacey, 1997). As Abma and Martinez

(2006) pointed out, until recently those who lived outside of the normative rules to create family systems did so because of external circumstances, such as a ban on marriage for those without property. However, in many modern industrialized societies, it is increasingly unclear what is the exception and what is the rule regarding the boundaries that define a family. The normative parameters have become complex as individuals functionally take on marital or parental roles for brief or indefinite periods in absence of legal or biological ties. One could ask whether family includes only biological or legally related people, or extends to cohabiting (same or opposite gendered) partners, their (biological or otherwise) children, additional caretakers of the children, and so forth.

Martin (1998) posed several premises for expanding the standard family model, including that family not be defined on the basis of the biological relationship between members, the number of households, the number of parents, the gender of the parents, or the sexual orientation of the parents and children. Rather, she proposed an alternative model where family be defined based of the functionality and psychology of the family unit. As an example, parents in this model are defined as those who are committed to raising a child, regardless of their biological relationship to the child, their legal rights and responsibilities, the number of parents present, and whether the parents have sexual relationships with one another. In this chapter we examine how religion and spirituality relate to some diverse family structures that fall within such an expanded model of family.

Conceptualizing Religion and Spirituality

Ambiguity surrounding the demarcation of *family* is akin to the tensions surrounding the boundaries of *religion* versus *spirituality*. These two domains are increasingly polarized in popular culture and social science literature (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1999). Being religious tends to be portrayed as membership in an organized religious group; adherence to institutional doctrine, worship, or rituals; and external social control by religious authority. Being spiritual is often depicted as involving a personal connection to the sacred; a private search for enlightenment, purpose, meaning, or virtues; and internal spiritual motivation. Yet 65% of Americans describe themselves as “spiritual and religious,” with another 15% to 20% claiming to be “spiritual but not religious,” and 5% to 10% saying they are “religious but not spiritual” (Marler & Hadaway, 2002).

Thus, in studying the role of spirituality in family functioning, researchers are challenged to develop conceptual models that recognize the growing destitutionalization of spirituality while recognizing that participation in organized religion is a major pathway most people use to foster their spirituality.

Pragmatically, when it comes to empirical findings on the intersection of faith and family, abstract theoretical debates over the definitions of religion versus spirituality are essentially moot because researchers have relied so heavily on single items to tap these overlapping domains. About 75% to 85% of peer-reviewed, published studies conducted in the past 30 years assess whether a given family member endorses affiliates with a particular religious tradition, attends religious services, or says that religion or spirituality is personally important (Mahoney, 2010; Mahoney, Pargament, Swank, & Tarakeshwar, 2001). In short, most controlled research assesses a given family member's overall engagement in public (e.g., affiliation, attendance rates) or private (e.g., frequency of prayer) forms of religiousness. Because of the global nature of these items, it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify unique spiritual beliefs or practices found within or outside of organized religion that could impact family relationships.

Relational Spirituality as a Conceptual Lens: Focus on Formation and Maintenance of Diverse Family Relationships

Mahoney (2010; in press) recently developed a conceptual framework called *relational spirituality* to delineate the multifaceted and complex interface of spirituality and family life, and to highlight unique and specific psychospiritual processes that could facilitate or undermine relationship functioning in both traditional and nontraditional families (Mahoney, 2010; in press). In this framework, "spirituality" is defined as the "search for the sacred" (Pargament & Mahoney, 2002), a definition that encompasses the formation, maintenance, and transformation of one's connection to the sacred. The sacred includes concepts of God, the divine, and the transcendent and extends to virtually any aspect of life that can become part of the sacred via its association with, or representation of, divinity (Mahoney, Pargament, & Hernandez, 2010). Spirituality includes unconventional pathways people take outside of institutional religion in their search for the sacred and well-worn pathways pursued within institutional religious contexts. Parallel

to the search for the sacred, individuals also search for family relationships in three interactive stages over time: (a) formation, which refers to creating and structuring a familial bond; (b) maintenance, which refers to sustaining the quality and stability of chosen relationships; and (c) transformation, which refers to coping with family or life stressors that call for fundamental changes in the structure or processes of family relationships. The integration of the searches for the sacred and relationships constitutes *relational spirituality*.

This chapter elaborates the portion of Mahoney's relational spirituality framework that addresses the role of spirituality in structuring and maintaining diverse types of family forms. Readers are referred elsewhere for an elaboration of numerous in-depth psychospiritual processes that may operate within families (Mahoney, in press). In particular, we focus here on the fact that widespread controversies in public discourse about family structures seem to reflect underlying theological disputes over what type of family is spiritually legitimate and optimal (e.g., heterosexual marriage with biological children versus same-sex marriages and parenthood with nonmarital births). However, diverse faith communities tend to promote similar virtues for how family members should act to sustain healthy family relationships as signs of relationship success (e.g., commitment, sacrifice, love). Before proceeding to review empirical findings, we offer illustrations of the divergent and overlapping theological positions on the formation and maintenance, respectively, of traditional and nontraditional families.

Theological Perspectives on the Formation and Maintenance of Family Relationships

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to delineate all of the many beliefs and practices pertaining to family life within major world religions (see Browning & Clairmont, 2007; Onedera, 2008). Furthermore, doctrinal and ritual variations exist within each religion that stem from differences in regional and sectarian religious traditions, sociocultural influences, interpretation of sacred texts, and personal preferences. Thus, we have chosen to highlight general traditional and progressive theological stances advocated within various world religions about (1) what kinds of family relationships should be formed and (2) how family members should treat each other to maintain their relationships. Perhaps increased attention to theological orientations about these two distinctive normative questions will spark more scientific research on diverse types of families.

Formation of Family Relationships

PREDOMINANT THEOLOGICAL VIEW INFLUENCING SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

Most empirical research on faith and family has overwhelmingly involved national or community samples from the United States (Mahoney, 2010; Mahoney et al., 2001) and thus participants who are predominately affiliated with a Christian denomination. For example, 70% to 75% of parents of US adolescents describe themselves as Catholic or Protestant, with 10% or 15% endorsing "none" for affiliation (Smith, 2005). It is understandable therefore that much of the interpretation about empirical links between global markers of religious involvement and family functioning within social science literature relies on religious familism as a conceptual framework since mainline Protestantism has been a dominating historical influence on discourse about family life in American culture (Ruether, 2000). To reiterate, religious familism refers to the ideology that the family should be governed by certain religious positions on family life emphasized by mainline religions, particularly by conservative branches of American Protestantism (Edgell, 2003, 2006; Wilcox, 2004). For example, in conservative Christianity, marriage is considered to be an explicit expression for the commitment of a man and woman to one another that provides the necessary structure for sexual intimacy and childbearing, resulting in nonmarital sex, same-sex marriage, cohabitation, single parenthood, and stepfamilies being morally undesirable (Zink, 2008). In sum, religious familism reflects doctrines rooted in traditional Christianity that idealize and reinforce mid-20th-century, middle-class views of "the good family," consisting of married heterosexuals with biological children (Edgell, 2003, 2006; Edgell & Docka, 2007).

The conceptual lens of religious familism is consistent with predominant theological positions in Islam and Judaism that uphold and defend the biological nuclear family as the spiritual ideal for a family structure. For example, within conservative and orthodox Judaism, marriage followed by procreation mirrors the very nature of God (Onedera, 2008; Wertheimer, 2007). In Islam, marriage is also considered to be inherently religious (Al-Jibaly, 2000) and a religious obligation to complete one's faith (Altareb, 2008). Because marriage is considered the only legitimate way for men and women to be alone together, alternative family formations, such as cohabitation and same-sex unions, are ruled out as viable options within Islam (Altareb, 2008). Thus, most

monotheistic traditions argue that a family headed by a married heterosexual pair is the ideal context to bear and raise human beings (Dorff, 2008).

ALTERNATIVE THEOLOGICAL VIEWS

There are other common theological models that have had less influence on social science research. In Confucianism, for example, family is defined not as a nuclear unit but as an extended unit that often involves four generations living together (Meyer, 2007). Similarly, a traditional Hindu family consists of multiple generations living in the same household with a common kitchen and jointly owning property (Meyer, 2007; Williams, 2007). Both Hinduism and Confucianism value family identity above self-identity and individual needs (Meyer, 2007; Williams, 2007). In fact, the Hindu concepts of self and family are integral rather than separate concepts. Williams (2007) has pointed out that immigrants with other religions have begun to raise anew the question of defining the family in American society.

Parallel to the increased acceptance of diverse family structures during the 20th century in American society generally (Jensen, 2006; Stacey, 1997), theological justifications emerged within progressive segments of Christianity that rejected "natural law" rooted in biological ties as the guiding principle to demarcate the boundaries of family and instead defended nontraditional family forms, such as same-sex marriages, childless marriages, and single or adoptive parenthood (Ruether, 2000). For example, many liberal Protestants affirm same-sex relationships and honor same-sex covenants as vehicles of God's creation and grace in a similar fashion as opposite-sex marriage (Cook, 2008). Ruether (2000) provides an insightful description of recent shifts in ideologies about the family in progressive segments of the Christian community set within her highly recommended analysis of the ever-changing history of diverse Christian perspectives on family life since 1st-century Christianity.

Similar shifts can be observed in some Jewish groups within the United States. For example, changing social patterns within the Jewish community in America have prompted a reconsideration of fundamental assumptions concerning the composition of the Jewish family with marriage as the ideal (Wertheimer, 2007). The Jewish community currently includes many singles, single parents, blended families, and homosexual families resulting in contemporary Jews stretching Jewish norms to apply to these new circumstances (Dorff, 2008). This is

made clear in the Central Conference of American Rabbis' statement on human sexuality (1998):

In our age, the traditional notion of family as being two parents and children (and perhaps older generations) living in the same household is in the process of being redefined. Men and women of various ages living together, singles, gay and lesbian couples, single-parent households, etc., may be understood as families in the wider, if not traditional sense. "Family" also has multiple meanings in an age of increasingly complex biotechnology and choice.

This reveals a shift in some theologians' views of the preference for biological parameters to define the structure of family, but not necessarily the value of family systems. The statement emphasizes that "[t]he importance of family, whether biologically or relationally based, remains the foundation of meaningful human existence." Reform Judaism continues to emphasize the family as the primary unit of intimacy grounded in relational processes of respect, trust, and love.

In sum, the conceptual lens of religious familism implies that religion's primary, perhaps exclusive, function for family life is to shore up the formation of traditional nuclear family structures. Here the word *religion* implicitly refers to traditional monotheistic religions. Yet reliance on this theological lens to guide scientific research ignores many questions about faith for diverse families. Does religion impact the formation of families for those involved in religious groups or individuals who theologially affirm nontraditional family structures? What, if any, spiritual beliefs or practices impact choices to form nontraditional families, particularly given that poor or working-class Caucasians disproportionately belong to these families and are most likely to feel excluded or judged by ethnically similar religious congregations (Edgell, 2006)? Will religion become increasing irrelevant to modern families as biologically intact, nuclear families increasingly decrease in number? With these questions in mind, we turn to theological rationales regarding the maintenance of the family relationships.

Maintenance of Family Relationships

In contrast to the marked differences within and across religious traditions on the formation of family relationships, we have been struck by the degree of consensus regarding theological views on what people should do to sustain the family relationships that they do form. Because of this, we focus our discussion in this section on broad theological

consensuses on ideal ways to sustain couple and parent-child relationships.

MARRIAGE-COUPLES' RELATIONSHIPS

Religious wedding ceremonies not only signify the formation of couples' relationships but also offer windows into the virtues that couples promise to live out to fulfill the sacred nature of their bond. Thematically, the following virtues are widely heralded on religious grounds as means that couples should use to sustain their relationships across the conservative to progressive spectrum within Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Confucianism traditions: compassionate love, self-sacrifice, commitment, respect, honesty, forgiveness, gratitude, and accountability (Onedera, 2008). It is important to note that although a minority of highly fundamentalist religious subgroups may imply that husbands have religious rights to physically or sexually dominate their wives, the majority of theological voices across major world religions do not endorse domestic violence or sexual aggression within marriage (Onedera, 2008). On the other hand, theological consensus places a high premium on sexual monogamy within marriage as well as same-sex relationships. Readers are referred elsewhere for a discussion on variations in theological opinions on the gendered roles that men and women should fulfill as spouses or parents (Gallagher, 2003; Hernandez & Mahoney, in press; Mahoney, 2010).

PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

Many world religions have religious rituals and prayers to signify the importance of bringing children into the world. These religious practices signal the significance of childrearing in the family and community, and highlight the responsibilities of parents to place their highest priority on facilitating their children's spiritual, moral, psychological, and physical development. Thematically, the following virtues are emphasized for parents across the conservative to progressive spectrum within Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Confucianism to sustain parent-child relationships: model and dispense love, self-sacrifice, commitment, protectiveness, and an investment of resources to ensure the child's well-being (Onedera, 2008). It is important to realize that although some religious subgroups, such as conservative Christians, emphasize that parents should instill a sense of obedience in children and condone the spanking as a discipline method, leaders of major world religions within Western, industrialized countries do not advocate child

physical abuse (Browning & Clairmont, 2007). Furthermore, Christian subcultures that support spanking also emphasize that parents balance this strategy with high levels of involvement, affection, positive parenting techniques, and other effective disciplinary strategies (Bartkowski & Xu, 2000).

Religion and Functioning of Families of Heterosexual Couples: Major Empirical Findings

Forming a Marital Relationship

People across the globe rank religious similarity as an important factor when searching for a spouse, and little has changed in the past 50 years in how much Americans desire a mate with a similar religious affiliation (see Mahoney, 2010 for review). Couples also decide early in their courtship whether (non)religious compatibility matters. That is, the percentage of couples who have the same religious affiliation does not change across the stages of dating, being sexually intimate, cohabiting, or marrying (Blackwell & Lichter, 2004). Conservative Protestants (CP), along with Catholics, Latter Day Saints (LDS), and Jews, are the most likely to marry people with the same affiliation, with 50% to 65% of these believers entering same-faith unions (Sherkat, 2004).

After adults establish an intimate relationship, they make choices about its structure. Religious involvement promotes getting married. Members of CP or LDS families (particularly women) and anyone who views religion as highly important more frequently enter marriage by age 23 (see Mahoney, 2010 for review). Effects of religious affiliation on earlier marriage timing also hold for Catholics and moderate Protestants, whereas Jews, liberal Protestants, and the unaffiliated tend to delay marriage. Religious attendance also encourages marriage following a nonmarital birth (e.g., Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2007) and making the transition from cohabitation into marriage (e.g., Duvander, 1999).

Forming a Parent-Child Relationship

For centuries, religions have encouraged married couples to procreate. Although recent overall female and male fertility rates in the United States have not varied due to affiliation with a predominant religious group or attendance, the personal importance of religion continues to be tied to higher birth rates by women (Mahoney, 2010). Consistent with religious traditions that teach that motherhood should be reserved for marriage, this link is especially strong for women over age 24, who are more likely to be

married, and disappears in subsamples of younger women. Furthermore, women who say religion is unimportant are more likely to have unplanned births, especially during adolescence (Hayford & Morgan, 2008), or to remain childless into middle age (Abma & Martinez, 2006). Women's plans to have children are also tied to greater importance of religion in their lives, regardless of how often they attend services of their particular faith tradition. This link holds for women who do or do not hold socially conservative attitudes toward feminism or family life emphasized by some religious groups (Hayford & Morgan, 2008). Overall, women who value their faith are more likely to have children and want to be mothers.

Virtually no peer-reviewed research is available on religion and men's desire to be fathers or their rates of parentage. Researchers, however, have sought to examine whether fathers involved in conservative Protestant churches spend more time than other fathers with their children after they are born, rather than being distant or absent; numerous studies have not found this to be the case for contemporary married men (see Mahoney, 2010 for more details). On the other hand, across religious denominations, married fathers who attend religious services more often are more likely to spend time playing with their biological children (Mahoney, 2010). These findings imply that men who are more intensively involved in the faith tradition of their choice may be more motivated to invest time in creating a father-child bond.

Maintenance of Family Relationships by Married Couples

MAINTAINING THE QUALITY OF MARITAL RELATIONSHIPS

Over the past three decades, multiple studies have found that higher levels of general religiousness of one or both spouses has been related to greater marital satisfaction (e.g., Clements, Stanley, & Markman, 2004; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008; Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008), less marital conflict (e.g., Curtis & Ellison, 2002) and physical aggression (e.g., Ellison & Anderson, 2001), and lower risk of divorce (e.g., Brown, Orbuch, & Bauermeister, 2008). See Mahoney et al. (2001) and Mahoney (2010) for further elaboration of this growing body of work.

MAINTAINING THE QUALITY OF PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

With regard to parent-child relationships, higher levels of religious activity by parents and adolescents

predicts better parent–youth relationship quality (e.g., Bartkowski & Xu, 2000), greater parental affection (e.g., Wilcox, 1998), more positive discipline practices (e.g., Volling, Mahoney, & Rauer, 2009), and lower prevalence of child physical abuse (e.g., Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Salzinger, 1998). See Mahoney et al. (2001) and Mahoney (2010) for an exhaustive review of these and related findings.

NUANCES REGARDING FINDING ABOUT FAMILY AND FAITH

As the representative findings cited earlier indicate, higher general religiousness tends to predict better quality in family relationships. Yet the findings are not as simple as they may seem. It is important to consider several nuances. One issue to consider is not merely individual family members' religiousness but also similarities between family members when it comes to religion. For example, spousal similarity in attendance tends to be more strongly linked to marital satisfaction and stability in national surveys than just one spouse's attendance (Myers, 2006). Furthermore, marked discrepancies among couples regarding religious issues are rare, but they are linked more to arguing about money and the division of household labor (Curtis & Ellison, 2002) and to higher divorce rates (Vaaler, Ellison, & Powers, 2009). The parallel has also been found among parent–child relationships. For example, religious dissimilarity between parents and adolescents is associated with more relational discord and distance (Stokes & Regnerus, 2009).

An even more important issue involves uncovering conceptually what it is about religion that makes a difference in family life. Constructs that focus on spiritual cognitions or behaviors specifically about family relationships yield greater insight than nonspecific items about a given family member's religiousness (e.g., affiliation, attendance, general salience of religion). For instance, studies show that couples who view their marriage as sacred and connected to God report greater marital quality and commitment (e.g., Ellison, Henderson, Glenn, & Harkrider, 2011; Mahoney et al., 1999) and less risk of infidelity (Fincham, Lambert, & Beach, 2010). Furthermore, studies such as these, which directly assess the perceived spiritual nature of marriage (i.e., sanctification) yield more robust and consistent linkages than general markers of personal religiousness. Religious traditions also offer families unique ways to interact behaviorally as dyads or family units that may facilitate relationship quality (Mahoney, 2010, in press). For example, deep spiritual dialogs

between college students and their mothers predict greater collaboration in dealing with disagreements, even after controlling for discussion of other sensitive topics (Brelsford & Mahoney, 2008). The meaning attributed to shared spiritual activities also appears to matter. For example, marital satisfaction is tied more closely to couple's perceived meaning of shared spiritual rituals than their mere frequency (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001; Marks, 2004).

Another issue to recognize is that while some beliefs and behaviors rooted in religion may help family relationships, other manifestations of religion may be harmful. For example, whereas religious service attendance has generally been tied to lower self-reported extramarital sex in national surveys (e.g., Burdette, Ellison, Sherkat, & Gore 2007), the odds of an affair paradoxically increase for high attenders who do not feel close to God and for low attenders who do feel close to God (Atkins & Kessel, 2008). Thus, religion may pose a risk factor if dissonance exists between public and private forms of spirituality. In addition, family members can turn to religion in ways that escalate rather than reduce their conflicts. For example, parents and college students who triangulate God into the middle of their conflicts in destructive ways seem to be worse off than those who leave God out of the dispute entirely (Brelsford & Mahoney, 2009). Similarly, although family prayer is tied to better child adjustment, open marital conflict about religious issues is related to poorer child adjustment (Bartkowski, Xu, & Levin, 2008). Overall, religion offers protective or risk factors for families of married couples with children, depending on the nature of the religious beliefs or behavior under investigation; for greater elaboration, see Mahoney (2010) and Mahoney, in press

Religion and the Functioning of Nontraditional Families

Little research has addressed the role of religion and spirituality for nontraditional families (Mahoney, 2010; in press). Nearly all studies either exclude diverse family structures or occasionally combine them with traditional families within their samples (e.g., studies that combine married and cohabiting couples). Thus, research is only just emerging on whether religion and spirituality shape the formation or maintenance of nontraditional adult unions and parent–children relationships. We now examine peer-reviewed findings published in journals on the role of religion in family functioning among diverse family structures and highlight questions that await exploration.

Same-Sex Unions: Forming and Maintaining

FORMING

In the 1991–2000 General Social Surveys, 4.3% of men and 3.1% of women reported that they had had same-sex sexual partners during the preceding 5 years, percentages larger than those identifying as “other” races, Episcopalians, or Jews (Sherkat, 2002). National surveys also highlight the relatively high levels of public and private religiousness by sexual minorities (Sherkat, 2002). For example, although gays, lesbians, and bisexual individuals tend to hold less orthodox views of the Bible and are more likely to be apostates than heterosexuals, gay men report similar rates of religious attendance and prayer as heterosexual men (Sherkat, 2002). Furthermore, although male bisexuals engage in the lowest levels of public religious activity compared to other gender/sexuality combinations, over 60% believe the Bible is divinely inspired. Despite the relevance of religion and spirituality generally to the lives of homosexuals, however, we know little about whether religion or spirituality influences the formation of same-sex unions. In terms of mate selection, one study based on a recent Internet survey ($N = 218,195$) found that homosexual participants assigned less importance to religious similarity when seeking a partner than heterosexual participants (Lippa, 2007).

Given that legal marriage has only very recently become an option for same-sex couples in a few American states, research on links between religion or spirituality and the transition from cohabitation to marriage is, not surprisingly, unavailable. One study suggests that higher levels of spirituality may motivate same-sex couples to engage in symbolic and legal actions to form a partnership that would be more difficult to dissolve. Namely, Oswald, Goldberg, Kuvalanka, and Clausell (2008) examined 150 lesbians and gay men in same-sex relationships and found that the importance of religion in their daily life predicted whether they had engaged in a formal commitment ceremony with their partner. Every unit increase in the importance of religious beliefs increased the odds of having had a commitment ceremony 1.6 times, even after controlling gender and relationship duration. Individuals were also more likely to have established legal ties with their partner, such as owning joint property, establishing a will or power of attorney, registering as domestic partners, or entering into civil marriage, if they were involved in a supportive spiritual community.

Various case studies and qualitative interviews also suggest that same-sex couples draw on religious beliefs in their conceptualization of what it means to marry or be partners (McQueeney, 2003), rely on religion to find meaning in their relationship commitment (Lewin, 1998), and use religion to sanctify and attribute spiritual significance to their relationships (Rostosky, Riggle, et al., 2008; Suter, Berger, Daas, & Durham, 2006). These initial studies raise the fascinating, but unresearched, possibility that a major reason why some same-sex couples fight for the right to get formally married is because they want their union to be recognized by themselves and society as having the same degree of spiritual legitimacy and symbolic meaning as heterosexual unions consecrated via weddings. Notably, alternative options to marriage are multiplying in modern societies to structure adult partnerships. Thus, the implicit and explicit spiritual meaning that wedding rituals bestow upon a union, usually witnessed by friends and family with similar spiritual values (liberal or conservative), may become the most distinctive factor that discriminates “marriage” from adult partnerships that are privately cemented between the pair via legal or economic contracts. Perhaps future research will help determine whether forming a union within a spiritual context helps sustain the relationship beyond the impact of other factors.

MAINTAINING

Descriptively speaking, about half of same-sex partners are religiously similar to each other, and one study by Rostosky, Otis, Riggle, Kelly, and Brodnicki (2008) examined whether this factor is tied to relationship quality. These researchers administered various single-item measures regarding religious affiliation and frequency of public and private religious activities and an index of intrinsic religiosity to a community sample of 90 same-sex couples. They found that 53% of the couples were similar in their religious affiliation (or nonaffiliation); 65% in frequency of religious attendance (whether this was low, moderate, or high); 54% in frequency of private religious activities; and 47% in intrinsic religiosity index score. Yet, unlike findings with heterosexual married couples, similarity in religious attendance or activities was not linked to the same-sex couples' relationship satisfaction. On the other hand, being more similar in intrinsic religiosity (i.e., depth and salience of internal religiousness) was correlated with greater relationship satisfaction. Thus, sharing personal religious and spiritual values covaries with same-sex couples' relationship satisfaction.

Rostosky, Otis et al. (2008) also conducted interviews with 40 of the 90 couples. Although the conversational prompts did not specifically ask about religion, 45% of the couples spontaneously brought up religion as pertaining to their relationships. Relevant themes included how religion had functioned as either a challenge or source of support in their relationship, how they negotiated retaining versus abandoning public religious involvement, and how they crafted meaningful personal and private religiousness. Rostosky, Riggle et al. (2008) also conducted qualitative interviews with 14 same-sex couples that revealed that the couples used religious and spiritual values to understand and undergird their relationships. Overall, Rostosky and colleagues' ground-breaking studies suggests that spirituality is an important resource for many same-sex couples who often engaged in spiritual activities together and tried to negotiate intracouple differences in religious expression in ways that met the needs of both partners.

One other study we located conducted among adolescents suggests that religion can be a protective factor against partner physical aggression among same-sex couples (Halpern, Young, Waller, Martin, & Kupper, 2004). Specifically, according to US national survey data, among 117 males and females aged 12–21 years who reported exclusively same-sex romantic or sexual relationships in the previous 18 months, participants who said that religion was important to them were at lower risk for violence in the relationship than those who did not view religion as important. Of course, as is the case with heterosexual couples, religious differences among homosexual couples could potentially also add conflict in the relationship. Kaufman and Raphael (1996) offer illustrative depictions of ways that individuals within a same-sex union are likely to differ with regard to their needs to express the spiritual dimension of life; for example, they may come from different religious traditions and have different levels of religious observance and depth of faith. Kaufman and Raphael (1996) also usefully describe how some same-sex partners may respond to religious differences by imposing their views on their partner or by disparaging the partner's preferences, which, in turn, can intensify conflict.

Overall, as is empirically true for married heterosexuals, initial scholarship suggests that religion can be a potential source of strength and strain for same-couples. We were unable to locate studies on the role that religion plays in decisions same-sex couples make to become biological parents or the

quality of their parent-child and coparenting relationships. Thus, much room remains for research on religion and the creation and maintenance of family units headed by same-sex couples.

Cohabiting Heterosexual Unions: Forming and Maintaining

FORMING A COHABITING UNION

Increasingly married couples are cohabiting before they enter marriage. Among recent marriage cohorts (married 1997–2001), 62% of women had cohabited prior to marriage (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008). Thus, cohabitation is becoming a normative route to marriage. Very recent national data also indicate that women who cohabited with one or more partners prior to marriage are no more likely to divorce than those who did not cohabit (Goodwin, Mosher, & Chandra, 2010). Moreover, couples with formal plans to marry prior to residing together are no more likely to divorce than those who did not cohabit (Goodwin et al., 2010). Thus, research has begun to burgeon on what shapes the decision to form a cohabiting relationship.

We located no peer-reviewed studies that address whether spiritual factors shape men or women's selection of cohabiting partners or tangible commitments to marry prior to cohabiting (e.g., engagement ring, wedding date set). For example, some individuals may reserve cohabitation for partners they view as a "soul mate" or believe God intends for them to marry, or for relationships they perceive as being part of a larger spiritual plan. Research conducted in the 1980s and 1990s documented that global markers of religiousness lowered the likelihood of the practice of cohabitation in that era (e.g., Lehrer, 2004). A recent stellar study indicated that the importance of religion in daily life and attendance, not denomination, are key factors that discourage or delay cohabitation for contemporary young adults. Specifically, in a longitudinal study of American youth, Eggebeen and Dew (2009) found that conservative Protestants cohabited less often as teens than nonaffiliated youth, but after the former group entered adulthood, their cohabitation rates were equal to mainline Protestants or non-Catholic groups, and greater than Catholics. Yet within *all* religious groups, adolescents who were high in attendance and importance of religion cohabited less in the future than those who were low in both factors. Nevertheless, one-third of highly devout youth did chose to cohabit, with mainline and conservative Protestants most likely to marry their partners,

whereas Catholics converted their unions into marriage no more often than nonaffiliated youth.

Reciprocally, other research indicates that the decision to cohabit tends to undermine young adults' participation in organized religion over time, especially for those who had been most devout. For example, Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, and Waite (1995) followed a large sample of men and women from the ages of 22 to 32, and cohabitation reduced church membership much more than marriage increased it. Similarly, national surveys over time with 15,197 adolescents indicated that those who cohabited were most likely as adults to disaffiliate from their religious denomination (Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler, 2007). Cohabitators also reported marked decreases over time in service attendance and religious salience, which dropped 44%, compared to each other family formation assessed, including being single, married, or having child(ren) in the household (Uecker et al., 2007). Thornton, Axinn, and Hill (1992) also observed that individuals who cohabited between the ages of 18 and 23 had significantly lower rates of religious participation than those who had not cohabited, even when controlling for initial levels of religious participation at age 18. This study reported that the decision to cohabit led to a greater reduction in religious participation among those belonging to religious groups that are most opposed to sex outside of marriage. Specifically, cohabitation reduced religious participation more for Catholics and fundamental Protestants than for nonfundamentalist Protestants. Thus, the negative effect of cohabitation on religious engagement seems greatest among young adults who originally took religion and spirituality the most seriously.

One possible explanation for such findings is that the cognitive dissonance resulting from inconsistencies between personal choices and traditional religious teachings may tend to push individuals away from organized religion. For instance, those who cohabit may question traditional religious rationales regarding intimate relationships, which may accompany skepticism of religious authority in other areas (Thornton et al., 1992). It is noteworthy that the links between cohabitation and decline in religious attendance in Uecker et al.'s (2007) study remained powerful even after controlling for sexual activity. Thus, a theoretical explanation should also account for the public nature of cohabitation that is unique from the potentially private nature of other religiously nonsanctioned sexual relationships that could equally cause cognitive dissonance. Additional theoretical explanations for the links between

cohabitation and decline in religious attendance may include that participation in many religious communities may be less rewarding for cohabiting couples whose family structure falls outside of traditional norms. As a result, cohabiting individuals may experience direct and indirect criticism from fellow believers (Thornton et al., 1992; Uecker et al., 2007). Overt, inferred, and even anticipated disapproval from a religious community may account for the decrease in religious attendance and the increased religious disaffiliation among those who cohabit (Stolzenberg et al., 1995). Overall, people who cohabit, especially if they do not transition into marriage, are mostly likely to withdraw from religious participation; this seems especially likely for people who were most religious to begin with and in religious subcultures most opposed to nonmarital sex. This raises challenges for religious institutions given the growing ubiquity of nonmarital cohabitation across the life span.

MAINTAINING COHABITING UNIONS

Three studies offer initial evidence that spiritual or religious factors could facilitate the quality of nonmarital cohabitation unions. First, Wolfinger and Wilcox (2008) found that among unmarried couples from low-income, urban centers who recently had a baby, higher rates of religious attendance by a father was tied to his higher relationship satisfaction and greater emotional support from the mother. These findings duplicated results with married fathers in this sample. In contrast, mothers' individual religious attendance was not linked to relationship quality for either married or unmarried women. In another study of this same sample of predominantly ethnic minorities (a.k.a. "fragile" families), however, higher religious attendance by *both* partners was tied to both parents reporting higher relationship satisfaction and emotional support toward each other and less conflict over his sexual fidelity (Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008). Third, Henderson and Ellison (2010) examined several religious factors in a national sample of adults in cohabiting or steady dating relationship (oversampled of African American and Latinos). They found that individuals who said they (1) shared core religious and spiritual values with their partners and (2) believed God was at the center of their bond were more satisfied with their relationship. The former factor also predicted expectations to marry. Furthermore, these links persisted after controlling for acts of kindness, consideration, and criticism between partners and demographic characteristics

In contrast, attending services together did not predict satisfaction net of controls.

Taken together, these initial studies suggest that religion and spirituality may offer unmarried heterosexuals resources to sustain positive relationship dynamics, even though the structure of their union falls outside of marriage, the context that religious traditions advocate as optimal for an intimate, sexual relationship. More research is needed to identify specific psychospiritual mechanisms that may account for these findings. Hypothetically, for example, individuals who are able to draw on a felt relationship with God to be appropriately assertive and forgiving in a cohabiting relationship may be better equipped to navigate conflicts and sustain mutual love and good communication. Alternatively, feelings of spiritual ambivalence and guilt in the eyes of God and conflicts with a spiritual community about cohabitation could increase the risk that individuals become excessively dependent on their partners for emotional or financial support, and thus are less able to set limits or exit the relationship if it becomes dysfunctional. These, and other fascinating questions, await investigation (Mahoney, in press).

Single Parenthood: Forming and Maintaining

FORMING

We were interested in locating research for this chapter on the role of single women or men who formed a parent-child relationship through non-marital birth or adoption. Only one study appears to exist on the role of religion in facilitating adoption, but this study was restricted to married women (Hollingsworth, 2000). No research appears to exist on the role of religion in decisions by unmarried or married individuals to use assisted reproductive technology to become pregnant. Finally, despite decades of intense public debate and research about the intersection of religion and societal *attitudes* about abortion, only three studies could be found that focus directly on the role of religion in unmarried, pregnant women's actual decision to obtain an abortion versus to sustain a pregnancy after they conceived (Adamczyk, 2008, 2009; Adamczyk & Felson, 2008), which are based on national survey data with unmarried adolescents. Pregnant teens who are more religious are more likely to marry prior to giving birth and thereby avoid abortion, based on a general index that combines private (i.e., prayer and personal importance of religion) or public (i.e., attendance and youth group activities) markers

(Adamczyk & Felson, 2008). Among pregnant teens who *remain* unmarried, neither public nor private religiousness influences abortion decisions, net of demographic controls (Adamczyk, 2009; Adamczyk & Felson, 2008). However, unmarried teens who report a conservative Protestant affiliation are more likely to give birth rather than terminate their pregnancy than Catholics, mainline Protestants, and Jews, but they are no more likely to make this choice than religiously unaffiliated teens (Adamczyk, 2008; Adamczyk & Felson, 2008). Finally, having attended a high school with a high proportion of conservative Protestants appears to discourage abortion behavior when women get pregnant in their twenties, but not as teens (Adamczyk, 2009). Adamczyk (2008) also found no evidence living in counties heavily populated by conservative Protestants influences teens' abortion decisions. Overall, these findings suggest that adopting conservative Protestant identity and close ties in this religious network translates into being more willing to become a mother out of wedlock, perhaps because these conservative Protestant subcultures value motherhood and pro-life choices above career or educational alternatives. Clearly more research is merited on the intersection of religion and spirituality, and becoming a single parent by choice.

MAINTAINING

Several studies on low-income and disproportionately minority mothers suggest that religion may facilitate good parenting practices in the absence of a biological father and under adverse economic and social conditions. Among single mothers, greater religious attendance and personal salience of God or spirituality has been tied to more maternal satisfaction, efficacy, authoritativeness, and consistency as well as less parental distress and risk of child abuse (Cain, 2007; Carothers, Borkowski, Lefever, & Whiteman, 2005; Hill, Burdette, Regnerus, & Angel, 2008; Sparks, Peterson, & Tangenberg, 2005). For instance, Carothers et al. (2005) gauged adolescent mothers' involvement with religious communities prenatally and when their children were 3, 5, and 8 years old. Although only half of these mothers participated in a religious community, higher embeddedness was tied to lower subsequent maternal depression and risk of child abuse, and to better child adjustment. In another 2-year, longitudinal study, Hill et al. (2008) found that mothers living in low-income urban environments who frequently attended religious services later reported greater satisfaction with parenting and viewed the role as less

stressful or irritating than women who attended less frequently, even after controlling for social support, self-esteem, and depression. These findings imply that religion may offer valuable coping resources to sustain healthy, positive parenting practices for single parents in adverse conditions.

Yet the global or trait measures of general religiosity used in the aforementioned research obscures the fact that certain specific manifestations of religion may exacerbate poor functioning in stressful circumstances. Extensive research on religious coping methods to deal with nonfamilial stressors (e.g., natural disasters, illness) shows that while maladaptive religious coping is less common than adaptive religious coping, it consistently predicts undesirable psychosocial and health outcomes (Pargament, 1997, 2007). Consistent with this, in the sole study that assessed specific religious struggles in parenting among mothers found that this was associated with lower investment and satisfaction in parenting (Dumas & Nissley-Tsiopinis, 2006). Clearly, more research is needed on the ways spirituality can be a source of solace and support or added source of strain in single parents' efforts to maintain positive relationships with their children.

Comments on Other Family Structures

In this chapter, we have highlighted research on religion and spirituality within families based on heterosexual marriage, same-sex unions, cohabitation, and single parenthood. Clearly, other nontraditional types of families could be studied because little is known about how faith operates within families headed by grandparents, foster parents, stepparents, multiple partners (as is the case with polygamy and polyamory), and people who have divorced, chosen to be childless, or encountered fertility difficulties. Interestingly, adults without children are less religiously active than those with children and are more likely to drop out of organized religion (Edgell, 2006). Divorced adults and their children also tend to decrease their attendance at religious services and switch or disaffiliate from a given denomination, although adult children of divorce report feeling as close to and supported by God as those from nondivorced families (e.g., Zhai, Ellison, Glenn, & Marquardt, 2007). Voluntarily childless women also report lower levels of religious attendance and affiliation compared to the overall population or childless women who plan to have children in the future (Abma & Martinez, 2006). The tendency for individuals in nontraditional families to distance themselves from religious groups

suggests that reciprocal influences exist between involvement in organized religion and decision regarding family structure. These bidirectional linkages challenge religious communities to help never-married or divorced parents, or couples who are intentionally childless or infertile feel welcome in religious social networks that are disproportionately comprised of biologically nuclear families. Edgell and Docka (2007) note that the standard North American family model has shown remarkable persistence as a spiritual ideal despite the fact it has never been the encompassing reality for most Americans. We hope the persistence of this idea does not hinder social scientists from further investigating the impact of religion and spirituality, for better or worse, on families in their many forms.

Conclusions

There is growing pluralism in contemporary family structures. Individuals establish familial ties with others and make decisions about the structure and roles within these relationships. Adults seek out partners with whom to live, with marriage often pursued as a goal. People create parent-child relationships, via conception and birth, adoption, or informal caretaking relationships. These bonds persist for time periods and in different combinations to create family units. Diversity exists in religious values about various family structures as does the theological controversy about the spiritual and moral legitimacy of various family forms. When it comes to morality, people's values will differ (see also the discussion in Yarhouse & Burkett, 2002). However, social scientific methods are powerless to speak to matters of ultimate truth and morality. People must decide how to combine information gathered from scientific and religious ways of knowing to inform their choices. Empirical research is confined to examining the correlates and outcomes of belief and behaviors. Although social scientists can offer information about the manifestations of religion that are generally associated with psychological and interpersonal processes and outcomes, they cannot resolve theological debates as to whether normative values about family structure should be based on biological and legal ties or on the quality of relational processes. Furthermore, an inherent and often lengthy lag in time is inevitable between the rapid changes occurring in modern family life and scientific findings that speak to these transformations. For instance, it will be some time before same-sex couples in stable, long-term unions raise enough children to compare rigorously these children's

adjustment to those raised by married heterosexuals who do not divorce. A scientific comparison of these two types of intact, dual-parent families would help untangle whether the biological composition or the quality of family relationships (or both) shapes relational and individual outcomes. Yet individual differences within each type of family will most likely far outweigh the impact, on average, of group membership. Issues related to diverse family structures and transitions can pose confusion for individuals who face them. Both individuals and religious communities face difficult normative decisions about whether to embrace or reject the growing pluralism in family structures (Edgell, 2006; Ruether, 2000). An intriguing empirical question is what kinds of religious or spiritual beliefs or practices seem to contribute to individual, familial, and societal well-being or discord in navigating the complex search for family bonds.

This chapter highlights that certain aspects of religion are associated with maintaining stable and well-functioning family relationships. Many religions promote virtues that facilitate positive family processes and offer resources that decrease the risk of family dysfunction (Mahoney, 2010; Mahoney, in press). Religious resources may be particularly helpful to families with diverse structures who may be exposed to a greater amount of stress and discrimination and may lack some traditional sources of community and familial support. On the other hand, it is also possible that certain religious beliefs, practices, or interactions can heighten family distress.

Access to religious participation and fit with religious communities for those with diverse family structures will depend in part on the approaches of religious communities. Edgell (2003, 2006) observes that the major religious institutions in the United States developed a template for ministry during the 1950s based on a traditional family formation that declined soon thereafter. Despite major changes in the makeup of American families, many religious groups organize ministry around the cultural ideal (Edgell, 2006) or operate with a "stretched" version of the standard family ideal, for example, by accommodating changes in gender roles and sexual orientation expectations (Edgell & Docka, 2007, p. 30). A minority of churches have focused on institutionally adjusting to nontraditional models of the family, for example, by embracing congregants as single individuals, elevating the status of the extended family, or relinquishing biological relatedness as a spiritually optimal characteristic of parent-child relationships.

Directions for Research on Spirituality and the Family

Our review highlights the need for further research to evaluate how spirituality operates in varying family formations with diverse religious backgrounds. An enormous amount of work remains to identify maladaptive and adaptive influences of spirituality for diverse families. Attention to both positive and negative manifestations of religion and spirituality can aid in decreasing simplistic stereotypes and can facilitate dialog among groups of diverse persuasions. Additional in-depth findings about nontraditional families could also inform religious leaders who face challenges reconciling the growing gap between religious and societal norms about acceptable family structures. Future research may discover, for instance, that many individuals avoid participating in organized religion because traditional theological stances about nontraditional families foster a sense of being marginalized by religious communities, create internal dissonance, and seem irrelevant to the realities of contemporary family relationships.

To achieve the goal of gathering information about the multifaceted roles of religion for family relationships, greater depth is needed with regard to conceptual models. Many of the studies on religion and family functioning fail to articulate clearly what it is about religion that matters. More fine-grained models of the role of religious beliefs and behaviors in family life are required to explore how religion influences family outcomes in ways that are unique from other psychological or social processes. For example, in research on religious participation and cohabitation and same-sex unions, religious participation is often interpreted as a proxy for psychosocial constructs that are not specific to religion. The argument that religious constructs may be important in their own right, and not merely endogenous to couple relationships, will be more persuasive when studies address specific psychospiritual mechanisms (Mahoney, in press).

Along similar lines, reviews of the literature on the role of religion in family life in general, and for diverse family structures in particular, revealed that most researchers have made use of limited and superficial measures of religion (Mahoney, 2010; Mahoney et al., 2001). Many studies have relied on single or few items consisting of presence or type of religious affiliation, religious service attendance, overall importance of religion, or similarity within couples on these variables. Fewer studies used in-depth measures of an individual family member's faith. It is even rarer for studies to delve into how family members incorporate faith within

their relationships. Inquiry into the influence of religion should encompass not only individual but also relational functioning. An emerging exception is a growing body of research on the sanctification of marriage, sexuality, and intimate relationships (Mahoney et al., 2010). Similarly, relational spiritual functioning can be tapped by examining the prevalence, nature, and influence of family members engaging in spiritually dialogs (e.g., Brelsford & Mahoney, 2008) or activities focused on a relationship, such as praying for or with a partner (e.g., Fincham et al., 2010). Other forms of relational spirituality involve people relying on a felt connection to the divine to guide family life. For example, in coping with marital conflict, Butler and Harper (1994) articulated helpful and harmful ways that a spouse may privately turn to God to navigate marital conflict. From a family system's perspective, connections to the divine can operate alongside other family relationships, with or without the awareness of other family members. Other research questions involve whether violating certain religious values about family structure pose relational risks to individuals within diverse family structures. Future studies may reveal painful, irreconcilable divisions about the family forms that people within and across subcultures affirm as sacred.

Greater richness in the conceptualizing and measurement of religion and spirituality in family life will facilitate research findings that are more persuasive to theorists, practitioners, or policy makers regarding unique benefits or risks that religion offers for family relationships. This could help policy makers communicate clearly in the public square, family practitioners relate effectively to clients, and religious organizations clarify messages about the family. When data are available about specific religiously based beliefs or behaviors that increase favorable family outcomes such as stability, communication, and relationship satisfaction, and decrease unfavorable family outcomes such as divorce, distress, and violence, these can be used to educate people about the more malleable religious factors tied to family success. Finally, findings about traditional and nontraditional families that offer more nuance could facilitate constructive dialogs about the role of religion and spirituality within and across families and communities of believers and nonbelievers alike. Ultimately, as scientific evidence about the risks and rewards of intertwining the domains of faith and family becomes more visible, this will enhance compassion and communication between families of all kinds.

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