God, Me, and Thee: Associations Between Religion, Sexuality, and Marital Connection

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God, Me, and Thee: Associations Between Religion, Sexuality, and Marital Connection

Rebecca Walker Clarke

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

God, Me, and Thee: Associations Between Religion, Sexuality, and Marital Connection

Rebecca Walker Clarke
School of Family Life, Brigham Young University
Doctor of Philosophy

There is a well-established and positive association between religiosity and marital satisfaction. What is less clear is the effect of religiosity on marital sexual outcomes, with research findings that have run the gamut from negative to positive. Given that most religions teach that marriage is the divinely appointed context for a sexual relationship, religious persons who are married and in sexual relationships could have a different experience with sex than those who are not in a marital sexual relationship. Although the majority of the population in the United States is religious, sex in religious marriages has received scant research attention. The purpose of this dissertation is to examine in three manuscripts the association between religiosity, sexuality, and marital connection.

In manuscript one, I look at how doctrine of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints dovetails with principles of social science in ways that could potentially improve the sexual connection in these religious marriages. Specifically, I examine how Latter-day Saints can better sanctify their sexuality through autonomy and relatedness. As member couples dovetail healthy religious principles with social science principles, such as focusing on avoiding selfishness and developing a self in a larger moral context, they can experience improved marital connection.

In study two, I research the spontaneous mentions of sexuality in interviews with highly religious families in the American Families of Faith dataset. These 198 highly religious families come from a rich variety of socioeconomic, racial/ethnic, and religious backgrounds. Couples and families mention four major themes that matter to them at the intersection of religion and
sexuality—boundaries and rules of sex, purposes of sex, navigating culture and media, and concerns around children and sex, such as imparting values. I also offer clinicians who work with religious couples and families ways to help their clients better navigate the intersection between religion and sex.

In study three, I use a nationally representative (CREATE) survey dataset to examine the effect of religion on marital connection (emotional and sexual), and whether commitment and empathy mediate that relationship. Commitment and empathy are both elements of Martin Buber’s dialogic philosophy that should help individuals enjoy better connection. The association between religion and marital connection is analyzed over time (Waves II, III, and IV, which are approximately one year apart) and with dyadic data (1,818 households completed all three waves). Commitment and empathy do concurrently mediate the relationship between religion and marital connection, but the effects do not last over time, suggesting that these connective attributes need to be renewed often to have a positive effect on marital outcomes.

Religion appears to have a positive impact on marital sexuality and marital connection. Popular thought might indicate that marriage often settles into comfortable complacency, but it is not doomed to. Like dynamic individuals, religious married individuals might find their relationship gets better with time and effort. Married religious individuals might also benefit from future research that examines specific religious doctrines or teachings that help married couples enjoy sanctified sex and increase marital connection.

Keywords: marital connection, healthy sexuality, religion
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Halfway through my Marriage and Family Therapy master’s degree at Brigham Young University—the program I thought would culminate in a PhD—Sam and I had our first child. With the help of our extended family, and especially my dad, I made it across the master’s degree finish line. With Eliza on the scene, I decided the PhD could wait. The timing feels sweet: I will graduate with a PhD from the Marriage, Family, and Human Development program at BYU the same semester as Eliza, now 23, graduates from BYU with her bachelor’s degree.

Eliza, along with her siblings Christian (12), Owen (14), and Emme (20), comprise the happiest parts of my life. Even as I have needed to give time and energy to this PhD program, my children have been my faithful cheerleaders. I have memories of them hugging me while I cried (there was more to cry about during the program than I’d anticipated), them praying for me, and notes from them wishing me good luck on tests and presentations. One of my aims as I went back to school was to keep my mothering ahead of school in terms of time and priority, and because of these self-sufficient, generous, and wonderful souls, I believe I was able to do that.

As much as my children offered me in terms of encouragement and cheer, it was Sam who made sure I had the time to complete my classwork and the space to finish this program and dissertation. I could not have asked for better logistical and emotional support. Sam made literal space for me by remodeling the old coal shed so that I’d have a place to write, and then delivered lunch and dinner to me there when I needed to stay buckled down. Sam did all of the things that I felt needed doing when I could not, whether they really needed to be done (like running kids to appointments) or because I wanted them to be done (like mopping the kitchen floor). Sam made sure it all came together.
The timing of going back to school felt miraculous to me, in large part because of who I was able to study with at BYU. Dr. Chelom Leavitt, my advisor, patiently listened, guided, and gave me opportunities while I sorted out what exactly I was trying to do. She is now a cherished friend. The other members of my committee were encouraging and thoughtful as well: Dr. Alan Hawkins, Dr. Loren Marks, and Dr. Daniel Frost. I count myself privileged to have worked with these scholars, whose compassion and intellect helped me refine and rework my ideas. I feel equally blessed to have gone through the program with the members of my cohort: Amber Price, Meg Jankovich, Lauren Andrus, Alex Cooper, and Emily Schvaneveldt. They were often the reason I kept going when I wanted to quit, and most importantly, they made me laugh.

My dear friends, including Mary McCann, who filled my writing shed secret stash with Oreos and other necessities, and my dear neighbors who cheered me on wholeheartedly, made the entire experience much sweeter. I have learned a lot about relationships through this dissertation, but also from feeling carried by those around me. And back to where it all started: Dad and Mom—Steve and Ardith—you always made school fun and good. Growing up with two teachers by profession and nature was a dream. I was told once in a blessing that you would be a support to me all throughout my life, and that has been true. You have prayed for me, edited for me, listened to me, and loved me through it all.

I am grateful that I had the chance to have this experience and write on something that matters so much to me. I feel like I am finally finishing what I started over 20 years ago when I worked on my master’s thesis, and I am grateful. I am grateful to a God who lives and loves us all, and who has opened unexpected and amazing doors in my life.
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Chapter 1: God, Me, and Thee: Associations Between Religion, Sexuality, and Marital Connection

Healthy religious participation has been linked to several types of well-being, including improved physical and mental health (Mueller et al., 2001), increased levels of happiness (Devine, 2019), and positive views about the purpose and meaning of life (Wissing, 2014). Being religious appears to bestow benefits not only to individuals but to interpersonal relationships as well. In fact, researchers of religion (Pinel et al., 2020) have suggested that religion is so interpersonally connective that it can unite persons across faiths and help eliminate isolation, even going so far as to term religion, “the holy grail of connection” (p. 167). Of course, being religious is not a panacea for creating or maintaining relationships. Although religion has often been found to help family relationships, it must be acknowledged that religion has the potential to harm relationships as well (Dollahite et al., 2018; Kelley et al., 2019). In general, however, religious adherents, especially those who are married within the same faith, report happier and more stable marriages than the general public (Amato et al., 2007; Marks, 2005; Perry, 2016).

Research on religion and marital satisfaction seem to largely concur that religion is good for marriage; however, the proposed reasons for that association are myriad. Some have posited that religious practices such as prayer (Chelladurai et al., 2018) or marital virtues such as kindness, forgiveness, and gratitude (Goddard et al., 2016) might enhance religious marriages; others have theorized that it is how you live your religion that impacts a marriage positively or negatively (Kelley et al., 2019). Others have found that religious activities carried out in the home were particularly nourishing for marital emotional and sexual relationships (Carroll et al., 2021; Dew et al., 2018). It is also possible that religion might benefit marital relationships through high relational expectations (Kimball et al., 2021). Although the connective power of
religion and marital outcomes in general is well documented, the specifics of that association are
still open to investigation.

Notably, one of the major areas of connection in religious marriages that is not well
researched is marital sexuality (Hernandez-Kane & Mahoney, 2018). Most religions maintain
that marriage is the only relationship that is divinely appointed for a sexual relationship (Buss,
2002), and there is evidence that religious individuals in married sexual relationships might
enjoy positive outcomes that non-married religious persons do not (Cranney, 2020). However,
religious individuals remain an understudied population in research on sexuality (Francis et al.,
2019; McFarland et al., 2011). Therefore, my dissertation research will examine this important
gap in the literature: How is religion associated with marital sexual connection? It is possible
that, like dynamic individuals, religious marital relationships are not relegated to simply getting
older and more well-worn, but more interesting. They can get better.

The Importance of Connection in Marriage

Strong and successful marriages have long been measured in the social sciences as an
individual proposition (Fowers et al., 2016). That is, if I report I am satisfied and happy with my
marriage, then my relationship is considered good. Although satisfaction and happiness provide a
useful measuring stick in many ways, scholars have warned this offers fairly “thin” information
about the nuance and complexity of such a foundational relationship (Fowers et al., 2016). In
response, researchers have recently begun to examine marriage in richer terms of relationality
(Galovan et al., 2021). Specifically, couples who seek connection (instead of individual
happiness) in marriage often exhibit other dispositional factors that improve marriage, attitudes
such as forgiveness, kindness, affection, and habits like spending time together and creating
shared meaning (Galovan et al., 2021).
As noted above, there are many mechanisms that religion might be working through to create marital satisfaction, and marital connection opens up new possibilities for research (Pinel et al., 2020). Recent work on marital outcomes (Galovan et al., 2021) suggests that looking at how connected a married couple is would yield a richer picture of such a complex relationship than looking at simple satisfaction or happiness outcomes. In this dissertation I aim to examine the associations between religion and marital sexual connection. In order to examine this association, the project will contain three distinct sections (chapters two, three, and four) that will function as individual manuscripts revolving around the same theme and question: How is the healthy expression of religion associated with marital sexual connection? Each manuscript also focuses on ways that religious leaders, clinicians, or individuals themselves might improve highly religious couples’ marital sexual connection.

Section One: Public Scholarship

Section one of this dissertation will be a public scholarship piece directed toward religious educators in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). The manuscript is titled, “‘What Binds Us’: Sexual Sanctification in LDS Marriages.” The LDS faith is one where successful marital relationships are highly valued (Pew, 2012), and yet official LDS Sunday teaching curricula about marriage are not well connected to social science research (Busby & Dollahite, 2020). A pair of LDS social scientists explain:

We have institute courses on celestial marriage and family relations courses, but currently course materials contain mainly the common religious material students will have usually received previously in other settings, with little information from relationship science. We are teaching how to try to be close to the Lord but not as much about getting close to imperfect human partners. (Busby & Dollahite, 2020, p. 153)
There is a gap in our Church teaching of some of the benefits the gospel can provide for enhancing connection in marital sexual relationships.

Therefore, section one of this dissertation project aims to fill the need to help religious educators understand the association between religion and marital and sexual connection, using social science and religious principles and teachings. Specifically, I examine the relationship principles of autonomy and relatedness in the context of a larger moral and religious framework, and how that leads to sanctifying sexuality, which increases marital connection.

Section Two: Qualitative Scholarship

Section two of this dissertation project is a qualitative study examining the associations between religion and sexuality in highly religious couples and families. Because religion has been found to both help and harm families (Dollahite et al., 2018) I use this theoretical perspective to answer the question of how families and couples grapple with the complex intersection between religion and sex. The sample for this study comes from the American Families of Faith Project and is comprised of highly religious couples and families (\(N = 104\) family and couple interviews), who are ethnically, religiously, and culturally diverse, residing in eight different socio-religious regions of the United States. This section is titled, “How Sexuality and Religion Intersect in Highly Religious Families: Implications for Clinicians.” This study addresses a gap not only in research on religion and marital sexuality, but also a critical gap in clinical practice.

Most clinicians report receiving sub-optimal or no training regarding how to incorporate religion into therapeutic treatment, a deficiency compounded by their being on average less religious than the general public (Marterella & Brock, 2008). Both of these factors might dissuade clinicians from bringing up religion. And yet, Post and Wade (2009) reported that
religious clients felt the strongest therapeutic alliance when they believed their therapist respected their religious beliefs by allowing them to grapple with and examine religious issues in therapy. It is often sufficient for religious clients to have religion brought into the therapeutic process and explore those potential associations with a clinician (Post & Wade, 2009). That is, a clinician does not need to be a religious expert, but simply willing to respectfully explore the potential impact of religion on sexuality in a client’s life.

Therefore, this section fills this gap in the research on religion and marital sexuality by suggesting to clinicians the most common issues that highly religious couples and families face surrounding sexuality. This section also explains the importance of asking clients about how their faith influences their sexual relationships, practices, and beliefs. This study includes specific prompts clinicians might utilize to explore these issues effectively and respectfully with religious clients.

**Section Three: Quantitative Scholarship**

Section three is a quantitative study. Although there are robust findings illustrating a relationship between religiosity and positive marital outcomes (Amato et al., 2007; Dew et al., 2018; Perry, 2016), there remain important questions to examine in terms of *how* religiosity functions in improving marital relationships (Mahoney, 2010). Section three answers the call for further research from Galovan and colleagues (2021) who ask specifically which of Martin Buber’s (1878-1965) “I-Thou” virtues might improve relational connection. Using Buber’s dialogic phenomenological philosophy as a theoretical guide, I examine ways religiosity might enhance marital connection, operationalized as both a relational and sexual construct, through the indirect effects of commitment and empathy.
The participants for this study are drawn from the Couple Relationships and Transition Experiences (CREATE) data collected at three time points (Waves II, III, and IV), approximately one year apart ($N = 2,115$; same-sex couples $N = 67$), which is a nationally representative survey of newlywed couples. Measures are religiosity (Busby et al., 2001), empathy (Busby et al., 2001; Busby et al., 2010), and commitment (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Furthermore, marital connection is operationalized as harmonious sexual passion (Busby et al., 2019) and relationship satisfaction (Funk & Rogge, 2007).

I use structural equation modeling to estimate the models. Path analyses are estimated between religiosity and relationship satisfaction and harmonious sexual passion, via commitment and empathy. Direct and indirect effects are analyzed between the predictor (religiosity) and the outcome variables of harmonious sexual passion and relationship satisfaction, via the mediators of commitment and empathy. An actor-partner interdependence mediation model (APIMeM) is used to account for the dyadic nature of the data (Ledermann et al., 2011).

In summary, this section of the dissertation examines whether religion and marital connection is related to specific I-Thou characteristics of commitment and empathy in marriage. This study examines religiosity and the effects of commitment and empathy over time on the outcomes of marital sexual and emotional connection.

**Conclusion**

Research on the associations between religiosity and marital sexual outcomes is scant, and married religious individuals remain an understudied population in sexuality research (Francis et al., 2019; Hernandez-Kane & Mahoney, 2018; McFarland et al., 2011). Connection is a salient element of stable marriages (Galovan et al., 2021), and creating connection is a fundamental function of religion (Pinel et al., 2020). Based on the overlaps as well as the gaps in
the existing research, this dissertation uses two rich data sets, and conceptual/theoretical, qualitative, and quantitative approaches to examine the associations between religion, sexuality, and marital connection.
References


http://www.jstor.com/stable/1449329


Chapter 2: “What Binds Us”: Sexual Sanctification in LDS Marriages

This paper will be a multiple-authored work. Rebecca W. Clarke will be the first author, and will fully draft the manuscript. Daniel H. Frost will be the second author, Chelom E. Leavitt third, and Alan J. Hawkins and Loren D. Marks if they would like. We anticipate submitting this paper to *Religious Educator Journal*, or an expanded book-length version to the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Living Faith book series.
“What Binds Us”: Sexual Sanctification in LDS Marriages

How to form loving, connected relationships is the focus of much of the doctrine in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Not only does the Church emphasize creating loving family relationships on earth, but the family is “central to the Creator’s plan” (“Family: A Proclamation,” 1995) and we anticipate these relationships extending into eternity. When Joseph Smith described priesthood ordinances that would tie families together, he used terms of connection such as, “binding power,” “welding link,” and “perfect union” (The Church of Jesus Christ, 2021a, p. 190). We even hope to eventually create a Zion community, where we can be of “one heart and one mind” with those around us (Pearl of Great Price, 1851/1992, Moses 7:18).

And our supernal aim is to experience at-one-ment with our Heavenly Parents and eternal sealing to a spouse. We take seriously the injunction to learn to love like God loves and to learn to love God, ourselves, and others.

Marriage is a unique relationship in terms of love and connection and because of its comprehensive nature and because it is the divinely appointed context for sexual relationships. Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are counseled that married couples “are meant to be unified in every possible way” (The Church of Jesus Christ, 2021b, para. 3), and building this unity in a sexual relationship grants possibilities for individual and couple growth. The Church’s website states, “Love in marriage can be deeper and more selfless than in any other relationship. It is this type of love that Jesus expects of His followers, and it is the virtue that couples need the most” (The Church of Jesus Christ, 2021b, para. 2). We seek to develop Christlike love and connection in marriage, including through wholehearted participation in our sacred marital sexual relationship.
As we aim to connect more fully with a spouse sexually, we can learn to love more like God loves. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland (1993) said of love, “The first and great commandment on earth is for us to love God with all our heart, might, mind, and strength because surely the first and great promise in heaven is that He will always love us that way” (para. 10). How we choose to relate to one another in a marital sexual relationship is vital not only to the success of the relationship, but to our own development of agency, self-control, and our ability to love. In our discussion we will draw from principles of social science attachment theory, but because attachment can have connotations of individuality and determinism (Keren & Mayseless, 2013), to better capture aspects of relationality and volition we will speak in terms of connection, love, and sexual sanctification. In addition, rather than being based on behavioral tips or tricks, we will focus on gospel and research principles for developing a mindset and heart that can help us better love one another in marriage and create deeper sexual connection.

**Religion and Sex**

When Christ set forth the law of marriage, he highlighted the importance of marital physical connection: “For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife; and they twain shall be one flesh; so then they are no more twain, but one flesh” (King James Bible, 1769/1992, Mark 10:6-8). Our eternal hopes, along with many of our mortal desires, are aimed at experiencing connection—with our families, our Heavenly Parents, and a spouse. Learning how to connect sexually can be a template that can guide us in other areas of fulfilling our eternal destiny of connection. As Elder Jeffrey R. Holland (1988) said of the marital sexual relationship,

[T]he external symbol of that union, the physical manifestation of what is a far deeper spiritual and metaphysical bonding, is the physical blending that is part of—indeed, a
most beautiful and gratifying expression of—that larger, more complete union of eternal purpose and promise. ("A Symbol" section)

The power of marital sexuality can help us grow and learn how to better connect in love.

This religiously positive outlook on marriage and marital sexuality is not unique to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Most religious participation seems to bless marriage. In a study of Christian, Jewish, LDS, and Muslim perspectives, Marks (2005) reported that “religious communities, practices, and beliefs were of central importance in maintaining, supporting, and stabilizing their marriages in the face of time, stress, and other challenges” (p. 108). Other researchers (Wilcox & Dew, 2016) found that religious adherents were more likely to exhibit pro-marriage behaviors like generosity, commitment, and forgiveness. Further research has shown that religious marriages are more stable, with that stability extending into family life through more positive parenting practices (Mahoney, 2010).

Indeed, most Abrahamic religions see sex as a divine gift reserved for marriage that can teach its participants how to give and receive love in holy ways. For example, Hernandez-Kane and Mahoney (2018) have reported that the Judeo-Christian tradition refers to sex within marriage as an “authentic experience of the divine” (p. 426), that Christian theology maintains that sexuality was created to be a symbol of God’s perfect love, and Islam characterizes sexuality as a spiritually enhancing life force (Hernandez-Kane & Mahoney, 2018). Healthy expressions of religion can imbue sexuality with sacred meanings that enhance marital sexuality. Jewish scholars have asserted that the holy name of God is the combination of the feminine and masculine—Elo\textit{h}, a feminine singular Hebrew word for God, and -\textit{im}, a masculine plural ending (Sellers, 2017, p. 63). When a husband and wife join together sexually they create a tabernacle of love, or a literal dwelling place for God (Sellers, 2017). The United States Conference of
Catholic Bishops (2006) stated that sexuality “is a gift of God by which men and women participate in his saving plan and respond to his call to grow in holiness” (2006, p. 405). The idea that continued growth and learning can occur in a marital sexual relationship was reiterated by these Catholic Bishops, “The unitive aspect of marriage involves the full personhood of the spouses, a love that encompasses the minds, hearts, emotions, bodies, souls, and aspirations of husband and wife. They are called to grow continually in unitive love” (USCCB, 2006, p. 408). Most religions offer marital sexuality a context and meaning that can be helpful to this sacred relationship.

However, not all religious messaging about sex is positive, or at least not all religious messaging about sex is perceived that way. Sometimes religious sex-positive messaging is limited by well-intentioned teachers, leaders, or members who are so concerned about the boundaries and regulations that should surround sexuality that they set up a metaphorical web of caution tape. This can lead members to believe that sex is essentially a crime scene that is suspect, problematic, and likely best avoided. For example, one Lutheran man expressed that his parochial education had a negative effect on him. “The education that I got . . . was to just, ignore [sex], and have shame about it. I think it has hurt our marriage. And it certainly has closed me up” (Clarke et al., 2021, p. 11). Researchers have suggested that religious adherents might experience more sexual shame and guilt than non-members (Murray et al., 2007), and that religious people are more likely than those who are non-religious to hold limiting views of the acceptability of sexual pleasure (Woo et al., 2012). It appears that those who can find the sex-positive perspective in their faith, or see sex as a divine gift, are able to overcome the potential negative impacts that religion might have on marital sexuality and tap into higher possibilities.
Sexual Sanctification

Sexual sanctification is a relatively new term used in social science research to indicate the belief that sex is divinely appointed or a sacred marital act, one with divine character and significance (Hernandez et al., 2014). Couples who sanctify their sex are more likely to agree with questions such as, “Being sexually intimate with my spouse feels like a deeply spiritual experience,” “Our sexual relationship seems like a miracle to me,” “There are moments when we are sexually intimate that time stands still and I feel like I am part of something eternal,” and, “At moments, being sexually intimate with my spouse makes me very aware of a creative power beyond us” (Hernandez-Kane & Mahoney, 2018, p. 428). Couples who sanctify their spousal sexual relationship and believe it is a reflection of God’s will generally experience a more healthy, satisfying, and vibrant marital sex life than those who do not sanctify their sexual relationship (Leonhardt et al., 2019).

Sexual sanctification is well-suited to marital sexual relationships because it is a construct that, like marriage, employs a long-term perspective. Sanctifying a sexual relationship is predictive of not only current sexual satisfaction and improved connection, but of future sexual connection and satisfaction as well (Hernandez-Kane & Mahoney, 2018). It appears that sexual sanctification is most likely to occur in committed relationships. In fact, world-renown relationship experts have found that building a friendship with a spouse over time is one of the best ways to improve sexual satisfaction—for both men and women:

The determining factor in whether wives feel satisfied with the sex, romance, and passion in their marriage is, by 70 percent, the quality of the couple’s friendship. For men, the determining factor is, by 70 percent, the quality of the couple’s friendship. So, men and women come from the same planet after all. (Gottman & Silver, 2004, p. 17)
Sanctification is built and created, and is more likely to occur in a space like a marriage where individuals feel they are participating in something eternal rather than ephemeral.

Although sexual sanctification relies on conceptualizing and creating transcendent connection to a higher power and an abiding connection to a spouse, aiming to sanctify sex would fail if a couple used it to assume they needed to limit their sexual repertoire to only reverent, quiet, or subdued sexual experiences. Two scholars who write about spirituality and sexuality expressed the idea that God is not subdued, and that our sexual energy can be a vibrant reflection of our God-given desire for life:

Our God is a God of life—of exuberant, surprising, extravagant vitality. Our own generosity, our surprising ability to forgive, and our endless desire for more life all witness to this God-given energy within us. . . . Eros is the vital energy that courses through the world, animating every living thing. . . . It is the force that turns the flower to the sun, the energy that stirs humans to be in touch, to reach out and link their lives in lasting ways. (Whitehead & Whitehead, 2008, p. 9)

Piety might call for reverence in certain reflective holy moments, such as partaking of the sacrament, but not in all of them, like the joyful announcement of a mission call. That is, sanctified sex should include a healthy component of joy, delight, fun, and play. In fact, couples who report high levels of sexual dysfunction were found to be notably deficient in sexual play (Metz & McCarthy, 2007). Forms of sexual play are often highly unique to couples, further personalizing the couples’ unique sexual relationship and enhancing their intimate connection. Some play behaviors include affirming teasing, fun nicknames for body parts, special apparel, labeling special sexual times to the couple--like “Sunday afternoon delight,” and so on (Metz & McCarthy, 2007, p. 360).
Not only should sanctified sex include elements of play and joy, but every sexual encounter does not need to be a transcendent, miraculous experience in order to qualify as sanctified. Sanctifying sexuality is more about the meaning we bring to our sexual relationship. Like watching a favorite TV series together in the evenings, some sanctified sexual experiences are perhaps best described as an expression of comfortable and enduring companionship. Sanctified sex might also take on other less-transcendent but still meaningful forms, such as being energizing, celebratory, warm, funny, calming, and whatever other important meanings a couple would like to bring to it. One study that promoted a “good enough sex model” (Metz & McCarthy, 2007) reported that reasonable expectations about sex in long-term relationships are important. Sexually satisfied couples typically reported fairly regular patterns of sexual consistency (for example, perhaps once a week), and also reported the sexual experience was “good enough” about 85% of the time. Within that “good enough” sex, there was a range of reported outcomes. Specifically, sexually satisfied couples said their sex was “very good” 20 – 25% of the time, “good” 40 – 60% of the time, “fair” but unremarkable 15 – 20% of the time, and dissatisfying or dysfunctional 5 – 15% of the time (Metz & McCarthy, 2007, p. 357). Sanctified sex would likely follow a similar pattern, in that it will sometimes be transcendent and transformative, but even when it is not, it can be companionate, comforting, and connecting. And when sex fails, we can recognize that some failure is to be expected. In fact, in the face of sanctifying sexuality, a failure can not only be taken in stride, but even perhaps become yet another way (even sometimes a humorous way) to become more closely connected as a couple.

**Looking Beyond the Mark**

Even as we consider the benefits religion can offer a sanctified marital sexual relationship, we must keep in mind that anything taken to an extreme can be problematic.
Researchers have found that religion has the power to both bless and harm relationships, depending on how religious principles are lived (Dollahite et al., 2018), and sexual sanctification has this same dualistic potential. For example, researchers have found that sanctification may heighten idealism for a sexual relationship to the point that it feels like a failure when these divine standards feel out of reach (Mahoney et al., 2003). In addition, fanaticism or applying religious principles where they are not beneficial to both members of the couple (see Dollahite et al., 2018) could lead to a scenario where the concept of sexual sanctification does more harm than good. Consider the spouse who claims that in order to sanctify sex it should only be used for procreation, or the spouse who presses for obligatory sex because God wills them to be “one flesh” (King James Bible, 1769/1992, Gen. 2:24). That is, as we discuss religion and sexual sanctification, we need to remember that we are talking about healthy expressions of religiosity. Just like religious beliefs taken to zealous extremes are often a source of pain, the concept of sexual sanctification taken to an extreme can also become problematic.

C. S. Lewis (1960/1988) expressed the reality that to love is to entertain the possibility of failure: “To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken” (p. 121). Participation in a sexual relationship carries with it the potential to wring and break hearts. If a sacred boundary is breached, if there has been a power imbalance in a sexual relationship that is not in keeping with Christlike love, indeed if there has been any kind of failure in a sexual relationship—as there inevitably will be—the gospel gives us hope for repair and growth. It is possible to make that repair through “complete and redeeming repentance, which [is] only fully realized in . . . the true and living church of the true and living God” (Holland, 1988, A Serious Matter section). Repentance and growth should be part of our daily walk and talk, and part of our growth in our sexual relationship as well, remembering that
“Repentance isn’t His backup plan in the event we might fail. Repentance is His plan, knowing that we will” (Robbins, 2018, p. 22). As we aim to improve our marital connection through sexual sanctification there exists the possibility of “looking beyond the mark” (Jacob 4:14). However, when pursued in tandem with other important relational and moral values, the ideal of sanctified sex can bless marital sexuality.

Learning to Love

Given the importance of the role of sexuality in our lives, relationships, and spiritual development, it bears asking how love and connection in a marital sexual relationship are best created and maintained. How might we develop and use our sexuality in ways that bless our marriage and teach us how to love better? How can we best overcome the inevitable difficulties we will face in our sexual relationship, and enhance sexual intimacy in marriage? Latter-day Saint couples have Church resources to help guide them toward successful marital connection, including information available on the Church’s website, Sunday courses specific to marriage and family, and instruction from Church leadership.

However, the Church does not base formal relationship teaching on a foundation of social science research, but rather on general gospel principles that can be applied to marriage (Busby & Dollahite, 2020). There is wisdom here. The changing nature of social science research means that methods and questions being asked today differ vastly from those of 40 years ago (Walter, 2006). Therefore, it is possible that the social sciences might reflect current—and passing—trends rather than explicating principles of eternal truth about relationships. But if we allow eternal principles to guide us, we can follow the directive to “seek for truth wherever we may find it” (Uchtdorf, 2013, “Our Obligation” section) as we aim to deepen sexual connection in LDS marriages. Elder M. Russell Ballard (2016) made a call for utilizing both gospel principles
as well as expertise from other reliable and helpful sources when we navigate important elements of our lives:

When something has the potential to threaten our spiritual life, our most precious family relationships, and our membership in the kingdom, we should find thoughtful and faithful Church leaders to help us. And, if necessary, we should ask those with appropriate academic training, experience, and expertise for help. (para. 29)

There are useful, helpful truths to be found in relationship research that dovetail with gospel principles and have been shown to have a positive impact on couples’ marriages (Hawkins, 2015).

Relationship researchers have found that there are two needs in human relationships that must be met and balanced in order for a relationship to thrive, and these needs are autonomy and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Autonomy means taking responsibility for our own growth, choices, and needs in a relationship (Ryan & Deci, 2017). The second need, relatedness, means that even as we need to belong to ourselves, we also long to be in a meaningful relationship with another person as well. These two needs, autonomy and relatedness, often exist in dynamic tension with one another in marriage. When both of these needs are met and in balance, married couples can experience a profound sense of emotional and sexual connection. Researchers have found that principles of autonomy and relatedness are foundational to fulfilling sexual relationships. In what follows, we will examine how the combination of these principles with LDS teachings about divinity and eternal marriage can lead to richer sexual connection in LDS marriages.
Autonomy

Developing autonomy is the first step to being able to fully connect with a spouse emotionally and sexually in marriage. Autonomy means taking responsibility for our own growth and choices in a relationship (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Specifically, one cannot thrive as a person or a spouse if they abdicate their choices, responsibility, or self in a relationship.

The term “autonomy” in the social sciences finds a parallel in the gospel principle of moral agency. Elder D. Todd Christofferson (2009) explained, “We are moral beings and agents unto ourselves, free to choose but also responsible for our choices” (p. 47). Moral agency is supposed to be used in ways so that we act rather than merely wait to be acted upon (Book of Mormon, 1830/1992, 2 Ne. 2:26). And moral agency presupposes that good and evil exist independent of our actions. On the other hand, the ideal of autonomy is sometimes interpreted to mean that there are no un-chosen moral or religious truths. We live in a world that encourages individuals to live your truth (Kosow, 2017), with the operative words being your truth. These calls to be “true to yourself” can be empowering, especially when it moves someone toward safety or goodness. But it is morally and relationally problematic to deny the existence of independent moral truths, or to ignore the reality that moral and ethical standards form the context in which we choose and exist. The Psalmist wrote that the Lord "shall judge the world with righteousness, and the people with his truth" (King James Bible, 1769/1992, Ps. 96:13), with the operative words here being his truth. This gospel perspective provides a fundamentally different worldview from that held by those who claim there is no truth but that which we personally and individually believe to be true (Ramberg & Dieleman, 2021). Sociologist Christian Smith (2015) writes of this larger moral framework, “Human goods are not simply up to each individual to decide. There actually are real, true human goods. The implications of that
are immense” (p. 4). Elder Neal A. Maxwell likewise reminded the Saints of this important framework: “Some of us nevertheless feel as though we own ourselves, our time, our talents, and our possessions; these are signs of our self-sufficiency. Actually, God lends us breath and sustains us from moment to moment (Mosiah 2:21)” (Maxwell, 2001, p. 93).

Exercising autonomy in a healthy relational sense, then, demands an acknowledgment that we as individuals are responsible for our growth and choices in a relationship, and yet also acknowledge that we exist in a larger moral reality. This moral reality influences us in different ways. For example, most people recognize moral obligations to refrain from violating the rights of others. These “negative” obligations (to avoid unjust interference) are an important part of morality, but they do not form the whole of it. This is easy to conceptualize in sexual terms; we all recognize that it is wrong to coerce someone into sex against their will, but there is more to being sexually moral than avoiding sexual assault or even making sure that others consent to what we want (though, of course, these are necessary foundations). We recognize the immense power that Elder Jeffrey R. Holland (1988) described when we fail to regulate our sexual energy and power: “Unless such fire is controlled, your clothes and your future will be burned” (“A Symbol” section).

But God also gives us “positive” commandments that are intended to help us to become something (Oaks, 2000). Elder Dallin H. Oaks (2000) reminded members of the Church, our family relationships—even more than our Church callings—are the setting in which the most important part of that development can occur. The conversion we must achieve requires us to be a good husband and father or a good wife and mother. . . . Exaltation is an eternal family experience, and it is our mortal family experiences that are best suited to prepare us for it. (p. 33)
Certain actions and choices are fulfilling and enriching for us as human beings (children of God) in ways that others are not. They lead to flourishing, growth, and connection rather than self-satisfaction, self-justification, or stagnation. This acknowledgment of a larger moral reality should inform our relational and sexual choices, because doing so will steer us away from selfishness and making choices from a place that only acknowledges the supremacy of the self. We are not exercising true autonomy if we are simply following every selfish whim or desire—and that includes moving selfishly toward sex as well as away from it.

Further, in a paradoxical way, the more we accept and follow truth, the more we truly become ourselves. In the Joseph Smith Translation of Matthew, we read the Savior’s words describing this paradox: “He who seeketh to save his life shall sacrifice it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it” (*King James Bible*, 1769/1992, JST Matt. 10:39). We are empowered when we recognize our selfhood, and also recognize that we become ever more individual—ever more *ourselves* sexually and relationally—when we understand that as singular as we are as individuals, we exist within a morality that is greater than ourselves.

Though there is a danger in over-emphasizing the importance of choice, there is a parallel danger in under-emphasizing it. We must be careful not to interpret the language of “losing” oneself in the service of God to mean that God wants us to fade away into nothingness or to be mere passive objects, “things to be acted upon” (*Book of Mormon*, 1830/1992, 2 Ne. 2:14), in God’s hands. The German Roman Catholic philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand (1889-1977; 2007) offers an illuminating perspective on this point. He writes that the act of turning away from selfishness and pride and instead embracing humility (facing heavenward) is perhaps the most personal act we can take, and the one in which we truly become ourselves:
Our jubilant assent to our own insignificance, our heroic abandonment of all self-glorification . . . is incompatible with tepid mediocrity and cautious smugness. Humility . . . implies a heavenward aspiration that carries with it a breath of greatness and holy audacity. (cited in Crosby, 1996, p. 31-32)

God wants our wholehearted affirmation, He wants us to love Him with all our heart, might, mind, and strength (King James Bible, 1769/1992, Mark 12:30). None of this is possible if we offload responsibility for our actions or aspire to a state of nonexistence. The part of one’s self that one needs to “lose” is the fallen, prideful, self-centered self; the acting, willing, value-responsive self is meant to exist throughout eternity and really only comes into its own as it puts God first.

To be in relationship with another necessitates having two separate selves who boldly abandon “self-glorification” and possess a “heavenward aspiration” in order to form a divine connection between them. We exercise “holy audacity” when we humbly choose to become our most divine and autonomous selves, including developing our sexual selves to their fullest potential. It is through exercising autonomy that we can better sanctify sexuality and enjoy a rich sense of sexual connection in marriage.

**Choosing Autonomously in Marriage**

We might have more power than we realize to choose to turn toward one another in our marriages—power to choose not only how we act, but how we feel, and even what we desire. Recognizing that we have power over our choices is an important element of exercising autonomy. Elder David A. Bednar (2013) explained that “Every appetite, desire, propensity, and impulse of the natural man may be overcome by and through the Atonement of Jesus Christ” (p. 43). We can seek the help of Jesus Christ if we need to adjust our desires or feelings in marriage.
In a Conference talk years ago, President Thomas S. Monson (2011) quoted advice he had cherished from a small plaque that hung in his aunt and uncle’s home: “Choose your love; love your choice” (p. 68). Love is choice that we make, and choosing to love can help move us to a place of deep connection with a spouse.

We might be tempted to tell ourselves that we are “stuck” in marriage, or attempt to abdicate our autonomy to a situation or even to a spouse (and then either blame them for the mess or thank them for taking over for us), but in reality, we have a choice in our relationships. Part of exercising autonomy is retaining an awareness that we always have choices, and we can choose to turn toward a relationship or away from it in small, daily, important moments. Dr. Brent Barlow (2004), a professor of Marriage, Family, and Human Development at BYU, spoke at Education Week on how to build a better marriage. One of his primary takeaways was about choices, and he advised that there were daily decisions either member of a couple could make that would bless marriages. These marriage-changing decisions included deciding to improve your marriage, and deciding to change yourself first (Barlow, 2004). Dr. Barlow explained that often we carry the idea that we need our partner to change in order to make any difference in the relationship (how easy it can be to see the mote in our partner’s eye!), but with the mindset shifted toward our own choices, there might be surprising, small shifts that can make a big difference (Barlow, 2004). Consider the power of choosing to give a spouse the benefit of the doubt in a time of tension. Or to use a “soft answer” (King James Bible, 1769/1992, Prov. 15:1) in the face of criticism. Or truncating the imaginary scenario of, “Could I find someone more ideal for me if I left this marriage?” and replacing it with, “Whom would I ideally like to become as a spouse?”
Ryan and Deci (2017), in their groundbreaking work on what motivates human beings, found in their research that our motivations to love and serve one another are healthiest when they are autonomous (freely chosen) rather than transactional (what I will gain if I serve you). Being able to give autonomously is founded on the overall feeling of choosing to be in—and choosing to remain in—a relationship. Understanding we have a choice about whether or not to be in the relationship and have chosen to participate will make it easier to choose wholeheartedly to serve and love a spouse. On the other hand, if we feel obligated and “stuck” in the relationship, we are more likely to view serving my partner as a cross to bear, a continuation of the obligation we might be experiencing in the relationship overall. Coming to this place of wholeheartedly choosing to participate in a relationship might take some self-examination and reassessment, and it is a choice that is remade throughout a marriage, not just once at the altar. Although it might feel that we are obligated to stay in a marriage, or could not leave a marriage without devastating consequences and so cannot make that choice, it remains true that we could leave—come what may with the aftermath of obligation and consequences. The choice to leave or stay is our own, and recognizing that and making that explicit choice to be a full member of the marriage is going to be healthier emotionally and sexually for both partners.

It is important to realize that somewhere around half of all couples have had serious thoughts about ending their marriage at some point; however, thoughts of divorce are fairly dynamic and typically change over time to a more positive outcome (Hawkins et al., 2017). Of couples considering divorce, researcher Linda Waite who oversees the National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project, found a shockingly high number of unhappy marriages could be turned around: “86% of unhappily married people who stick it out find that, five years later, their marriages are happier,” even reporting they are very happy or quite happy (Waite & Gallagher,
Expectations have been called the thief of joy, and healthy expectations about marital happiness and connection can help us make wiser decisions about whether or not to work through marital issues. For example, if one has freely chosen to stay in their marriage, then they are more likely to exhibit pro-relationship behaviors and they are more likely to feel closer to their partner (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Freely choosing to serve and give to one another can impact the levels of connection in our relationships, both sexually and emotionally. “When we care about others, especially when we love others, doing for them is a fully self-endorsed, autonomous activity. And when others care for us autonomously, this is when it is most easy to feel loved” (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 300). We both give and receive love better when love is freely given.

Wholehearted, autonomous giving plays an important role in marital sexual connection. Researchers (Pippert et al., 2019) have found that couples’ motivation for giving and sacrificing for each other are typically motivated by either an approach mindset toward the relationship or an avoidance mindset of negative outcomes. When a member of a couple acknowledges the reality of their partner, and is motivated by acknowledging the needs and wants of their partner in an approach mindset, the process of balancing giving to a partner and practicing self-care becomes less stressful and more fulfilling for both partners (Pippert et al., 2019). Elder Jeffrey R. Holland (1988) pointed out that in order for sex to be binding and connective—and even in order to be acceptable to God—one must give “the gift of your whole heart and your whole life and your whole self” (“A Symbol” section). Social science researchers found that respondents similarly reported that the most optimal sex was when they felt a sense of belonging to themselves, because then they were able to reach out from a solid sense of self to make new discoveries together. “[B]eing centered in oneself and feeling respect from the partner allowed
them to expand their limits. Participants offered that ‘good’ and ‘clear boundaries,’ ‘self-knowledge’ and ‘self-acceptance’ were essential to entering into an all-encompassing, erotic union” (Kleinplatz et al., 2009, p. 6). Holding back our sexual development or our sexual selves in order to gain power or control is problematic. Choosing to give to a spouse freely and wholeheartedly can create a deeper sense of sexual connection in a marriage (Schnarch, 2009).

**Autonomy and Sexuality in Marriage**

Though we need autonomy to grow in sexual intimacy in marriage, left unchecked, autonomy can become anti-relational by veering into selfishness. The gospel invites us to acknowledge a power greater than ourselves, whereas the world tends to take autonomy to anti-relational extremes. No genuine marital relationship—emotional or sexual—can be formed when the exercise of gaining autonomy and belonging to oneself extends to selfishness and collapses under the weight of moral relativism. If we can only believe in our own reality and a spouse can only believe in theirs, there will potentially come a day when our worlds are so out of alignment that the relationship may no longer be viable.

Understanding there is a morality greater than ourselves not only forms the foundation of true connection, but also forms the foundation of sexual sanctification. Recognizing the divine character and significance of sex would prohibit me from entering into a sexual act with the notion that only myself matters. It is simple to conceptualize that the most intensely selfish sexual acts could be so internally focused that they might degrade into violence. In stark contrast, researchers (Impett et al., 2019) have found that there was an exquisite relational balance in couples that led to great sex, and that balance was achieved when people were motivated to respond to their partner’s sexual needs and wants, while also keeping in mind their own. We are taught by the apostle Paul the foundations of placing our very selves into a larger moral
framework that can support sexual sanctification, who wrote to the Corinthians, “know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?” (King James Bible, 1769/1992, 1 Cor. 6:19). Indeed, George MacDonald (1824-1904), who inspired C. S. Lewis through his religious writings, wrote, “The one principle of hell is, ‘I am my own!’” (Maxwell, 2001, p. 7).

Choosing autonomously in marriage does not mean choosing selfishly, but it does mean choosing intentionally within the bounds of a larger moral framework. This autonomous, intentional choice plays an important role in optimal sexual connection in part because choice fuels sexual desire. True sexual desire is “consciously chosen and freely undertaken desire” (Schnarch, 2009, p. 192). There are at least two major choices we must consider in optimizing marital sexual connection. First, we have to choose to fully participate in a sexual relationship, which can sometimes be a step of boldness for religious persons to take. Researchers have theorized that some of the reason for sexual shame in religious adherents is that sex is antithetical to Godliness and is at its root, sinful (Runkel, 1998). That misunderstanding of doctrine must be confronted with “holy audacity” to choose to show up wholeheartedly in a marriage as a sexual being. Second, the choice to be in a marital sexual relationship with a specific partner demands another act of courage, because there is always the possibility that our partner will not fully choose us back. Dr. David Schnarch (2009) wrote about the importance of choosing and being chosen in our sexual relationship, and recommitting to that choice in order to continue to experience sexual desire for a partner. He explained that in marriage we sometimes make the mistake of claiming (at least subconsciously), “You chose once and you’re stuck with me. There’s no going back, whether you want to or not” (Schnarch, 2009, p. 200). The flip side of this also holds true: we might fall mistakenly into the belief that “I chose once and I’m stuck.”
Obligation, and its more severe forms of coercion or force, are antithetical to sexual desire, while choice is the oxygen that fuels the fire of desire.

To freely choose to be in relationship with a spouse is one of the most powerful things a spouse can do for a sexual relationship. That might demand a revision of how we have typically approached sex. If one partner has been socialized to negate their sexual self or chosen to abdicate their responsibility for sexual development, they will need to reclaim it—and view their sexuality as a God-given good; both partners need to choose to claim their divine sexuality for sex to be connective and nourishing (Finlayson-Fife, 2021). Wives might struggle with this more than husbands. Not only are women socialized with more limiting and conflicting cultural sexual messages and scripts than men (Bordini & Sperb, 2013), wives are also asked to compromise and give more than husbands in marriage, through mechanisms such as providing more emotional care, more household work, and having a husband’s leisure activities privileged over her own (Dempsey, 2002). As a result, women experience fewer of the benefits that marriage provides (Dempsey, 2002). However, a good marriage is not a disappearing act for either of its members, and failing to develop our sexual selves is not a step toward virtue or righteousness.

A BYU School of Family Life professor (L. D. Marks, personal communication, December 10, 2021) shared an analogy that is helpful for visualizing the importance of possessing and developing a sense of self in an intimate relationship. Using developmental psychologist Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development (see Erikson, 2001), Dr. Marks related that if we wanted to give a friend a birthday gift, we must first purchase that gift in order to have the ability to give it away. Likewise, with intimacy, we must first develop a sense of self before we attempt to successfully share that with someone else in a meaningful way. We cannot give a gift for which we have not paid the price; and it is not in our best interest to attempt to
attain a gift in order to keep solely for ourself. Erikson’s stages parallel these ideas. In young adulthood our psychosocial task is to develop Identity (versus Confusion), and in later adulthood our task is to develop Intimacy (versus Isolation). In this way, marriage can be seen as an ever-evolving movement through these stages of developing our selves (Erikson’s Identity) and then sharing our ever-developing selves with our spouse (Erikson’s Intimacy).

That is, self-development needs to be balanced with relational couple development. Couples can create their own unique balance of relational roles in marriage, but it needs to feel right to both members. One study of highly religious marriages found that although most of these marriages preferred traditional over progressive gender roles for the couple, the couples who were happiest were those who figured out how to balance those roles from an egalitarian place (Leavitt, Allsop et al., 2021). In fact, when women silence themselves or subvert their needs in a relationship, it can lead to depression (Maji & Dixit, 2019). Perhaps this tendency to self-silence is part of the reason that women report initiating divorce at a rate almost double that of men (Hawkins, 2015).

Self-silencing is problematic in a sexual relationship because it compromises well-being and sexual satisfaction (Traeen et al., 2021). It appears that women in heterosexaul couples are more hesitant to speak up about their sexual wants and needs than men are, at least in the beginning of relationships (Traeen et al., 2021). This likely begins as a cultural expectation that women will be more giving and sacrificing for a relationship, but again, this particular sacrifice is not a worthwhile gift for either member of the couple. Researchers have found that sex was reported as more transcendent and more likely to be “great sex” when both members of the couple had “the freedom to be relentlessly honest with themselves and totally transparent with their sexual partners” (Kleinplatz et al., 2009, p. 7). Both husbands and wives can ameliorate this
tendency for women to self-silence in sex—and in other areas of relationship. A wife can lovingly, honestly, and bravely speak up about her sexual needs and wants, and a husband can create opportunities for her to do so. Clearly this should not be a one-way conversation. Both men and women in committed relationships experience increased sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction when sexual communication in a couple is high (Jones et al., 2018). Both members of a couple flourish when individual sexual wants and needs are communicated lovingly, openly, and often.

Loving and honest discussion make it possible to reach an understanding of a spouse’s wants, needs, hopes, and dreams—sexually and otherwise. For those who feel they have “disappeared” into their marriage, in addition to communicating clearly with a spouse, social science research on developing sense of self can be useful. Couples who are the most happily married talk about how their sense of self has expanded through marriage (Finlayson-Fife, 2020), and we cannot connect with another if there is no “self” to reach out from. David Deida (2002), an author who writes about spiritual and sexual growth, explains we must retain a connection to ourselves even while we are connecting to another: “One loving itself as an other, yet remembering itself as One” (p. 273). Remembering oneself as One might mean learning to oil paint, going back to school, learning to golf, volunteering at the temple, or spending more quality time reading to the kids. The idea of self-expansion has long been understood as a way to maintain sexual desire in long-term relationships, in part because of its connection to novelty (Mark & Lasslo, 2018). As we continue to change and grow, developing our autonomy and very self, the more we have to offer a partner. A good marriage is built of the same components as a satisfying long-term sexual relationship: both are an egalitarian union of two solid and growing selves.
Relatedness

Of course, exercising autonomy alone is insufficient for creating marital emotional and sexual connection. We desire to belong not only to ourselves, but to a meaningful relationship with another person as well. The demand for meeting both of these needs in a marriage creates an inherent tension. Esther Perel (2006) described the tension between autonomy and relatedness as a fundamental question in relationships that we grapple with throughout our lives.

From the moment we can crawl, we navigate the treacherous paths of separation in an attempt to balance our fundamental urge for connection with the urge to experience our own agency. We need our parents to take care of us, but we also need them to give us enough space to establish our freedom. We want them to hold us and we want them to let us go. Throughout our lives we grapple with this interplay between dependence and independence. (p. 111)

Relatedness is a human need, and one that needs to be successfully balanced with autonomy in order for relationships to flourish (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

As it says in Genesis, “It is not good for the man to be alone” (King James Bible, 1769/1992, Gen. 2:18). As researchers explain, our brains are set up to support pair bonding through the release of serotonin, endorphins, and dopamine when we are in the company of a loved one, which not only gives us a sense of well-being, but is so rewarding that we often want more (Hoyt, 2021). A lack of connection is problematic to our growth and happiness. In fact, loneliness and social isolation have been found to be a well-established risk factor for mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). Part of our quest here on earth is to build on this natural desire for relatedness and learn to love one another better. We can, with the help of the Savior, change our hearts, making them more able to love. We are promised in Ezekiel, “A new heart also will I
give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh” (King James Bible, 1769/1992, Ezek. 36:26). What do members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints need to do in order to love with a “new heart”? Following are principles for improving relatedness that can help LDS couples experience greater sexual connection.

**Relating to the Divine in One Another**

Developing a mindset where we aim to notice the divine can fundamentally improve how we relate and connect. Martin Buber (1878 –1965) was an Austrian Jewish philosopher who is credited to have formed the ideological foundation for couples and family therapy (Fishbane, 1998). Buber theorized that being in relationship with another person is how we are most fully human, and that if we relate to each other well, we can tap into the divine (Fife, 2015). Buber claimed that there are ultimately two ways of being in relationship with another person. We can either relate to others as an object, or in an *I-It* orientation, or we can relate to them as a full and legitimate other, in an *I-Thou* orientation. If I see you as an *It*, you will be an object to me. I will relate to you not as an independent center of meaning and choice, but rather as a stepping-stone or an obstacle to my getting what I want. This happens when people value partners for wealth, looks, security, status, or devalue others because they are acting in ways that stop them from getting what they desire. However, if I see you as a *Thou*, I will see you as a legitimate, full, and whole self (Fife, 2015). Only when we engage with each other in an *I-Thou* orientation can we be present, open, and authentic with one another (Friedman, 2002). In those moments, we are meeting the divine in each other, seeing them as whole beings and relating to them that way (Buber, 1921/1970). Further, seeing the other as a *Thou* fundamentally changes the *I* that relates to it. *I-Thou* and *I-It* are meant to be unitarity concepts, connected with a hyphen as they are, thus
describing not only ways of relating but ways of being. I cannot be the I I was meant to be unless I relate to others as Thou (Warner, 2001).

The authors of Relationship Motivation Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2017) echo Buber when they encourage us to see each other for who we really are. They claim that this will have a positive impact on how well we connect to one another:

A high-quality relationship is, at its core, one in which two people are interacting openly with each other, each from his or her own authentic sense of self. In high-quality relating, each person is empathic and accepting of the other for who the other really is, and each person is as congruent as possible in sharing him- or herself. (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 314)

One of the beautiful things about a sexual relationship is that it is an opportunity to see someone as they truly are, and sex can provide us with some of the most vulnerable and intimate moments of our lives. If we can relate to our partner in an I-Thou orientation then we will be curious, open, and aware of them rather than using them for our pleasure, refusing to acknowledge the reality of them, or being frustrated if they will not go along with our plans.

C. Terry Warner (2001) wrote about how to become more open with others and see them more clearly through an I-Thou perspective. One of the foundational ways to do this is simply to choose to see others as real, whole beings. Warner (2001) writes that we betray ourselves—or the best in ourselves—when we make the (often subtle) self-deceiving decision to relate to others in an I-It orientation. This is self-deceiving because, at a deep level, we know that others are children of God and worthy of being treated as a Thou. We live in a lie when we refuse to acknowledge this truth, and we live this lie because of convenience, self-justification, contempt, resentment, or any number of selfish reasons (Warner, 2001, p. 28). Warner contends that all human beings have the ability to sense whether we are approaching another human being as we
know we should. We treat others in the *I-Thou* orientation when “we open ourselves to their inner reality, and their needs and aspirations seem as important to us as our own” (p. 42). Warner (2001) further explained that Buber meant for there to be only two possibilities: To live for in an “open, generous, resonant way . . . for others,” or to live in an “accusing, alienated way, for ourselves” (p. 43). As we relate to others in their divinity, we become most fully ourselves.

Another way to connect deeply to our spouse in sex is to practice sexual mindfulness. Sexual mindfulness is the ability to stay present, focused, and non-judgmental during sex (Leavitt, Lefkowitz et al., 2019). Practicing sexual mindfulness is just that: a matter of practice, and it shares many of the same principles as mediation does. If you notice a distracting or intrusive thought enter your mind during sex, simply acknowledge it allow it to pass. Remain as nonjudgmental as you can—not only of your partner, but of yourself. David Deida, an author who writes about spiritual and sexual growth, wrote of sexual mindfulness, “practice gathering your awareness into the present moment, so that you are exquisitely attuned to every nuance of your body and her body, your breath and her breath” (Deida, 2002, p. 35). The more we can focus on the here and now and the reality of our partner, the more likely we are to sense the transience of this world that can make us truly appreciative of the moment. Through our sexuality, we can catch a glimpse of the infinite and divine in a partner. The fact that we are eternal beings sharing an embodied *I-Thou* moment so completely can heighten the wonder that we can connect with another in such a singular way.

**Challenges to Relatedness**

Deep marital connection takes work to obtain and maintain. Marriage challenges us to grow into more whole beings who can connect more fully to one another. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland was speaking of our membership in the church when he said, “’Come as you are,’ a
loving Father says to each of us, but He adds, “Don’t plan to stay as you are”’” (Holland, 2017, p. 51). But this would be a great mantra for marriage as well. Dr. Schnarch remarked that a marital sexual relationship has an innate power to provide us with challenges and experiences that can help try, test, and ultimately refine us:

A good marriage is not smooth, and marriage is not reducible to a set of skills. People have difficulty with intimacy because they're supposed to. It's not something to be “solved” and avoided. Problems with sex and intimacy are important to go through because this process changes us. These are the drive wheels and grind stones of intimate relationships. (Shealy, n.d., Question 5)

Challenges in our marital sexual relationship offer us the potential to achieve a depth of connection in marriage that can exceed all other relationships.

And yet even the idea that marriage can help us create “a depth of connection . . . that can exceed all other relationships” might cause panic in members of even the most happily married couples. It can be problematic to consistently expect the sun, moon, and stars from a marriage relationship, what scholars have termed a “high-altitude” marriage (Finkel et al., 2015, p. 241), because it makes it easy to wonder if we should seek elsewhere when our marriage falls short of reaching breathtaking summits (Hawkins, 2017). Hawkins (2017) has suggested that although it does not hurt to reach for an ideal, it is wise to keep in mind that there are times and seasons where a marriage might not match up with an ideal, seasons during which we would be wisest to seek comfortable intimacy.

Other scholars (Knee, 1998) have further suggested that there are differences in relationship quality and stability for individuals who believe that they can (and should) grow, learn, and change in relationships when compared to those who believe their relationship is a
matter of destiny, or they were “meant to be” together. Those who believe they can make a
difference by growing and changing in a relationship when the going gets tough tend to do so,
whereas those who believe their pairing was based on destiny tend to give up more quickly on
the relationship in the face of conflict (Knee, 1998). Having a growth mindset focused on
creating connection is better for a sexual relationship than relying on destiny or having a fixed
mindset wherein we tell ourselves that our marriage and the sexual relationship in it should be
nothing short of mind blowing. The more that couples viewed sexual obstacles or setbacks as
possibilities for realistic growth, the more they reported being sexually satisfied (Bőthe et al.,
2017).

One of the biggest challenges to sexual relatedness stems from both men and women
misunderstanding female sexuality. Because most sexual research has historically taken place
from a male perspective and male sexuality has been viewed as the standard (set in place by
Masters and Johnson, 1966), female sexuality has often been viewed as dysfunctional
(Kleinplatz, 2018). This might be part of what leads more women to present in therapy for sexual
problems as compared to men, and for more women to typically present with psychological
sexual difficulties rather than physical ones (Spurgas, 2013). However, religious individuals
might have the advantage of a mindset that these differences are not necessarily problematic, but
are instead divine invitations to better connection. That is, what could be viewed as a weakness
could also be viewed as a potential strength. For example, women are typically highly attuned to
the state of the relationship, with female sexual desire resulting in part from feeling like things
are going well in the relationship in general (Peplau, 2003). This could offer a couple reasons to
emotionally connect before attempting to connect physically—something that ultimately leads to
better sex for both partners (Kleinplatz et al., 2009).
Another difference between men and women that might challenge relatedness is that men report feeling sexual desire more often than women, and women are less likely to report feeling sexual desire than men even when women are (physically) measurably aroused (Baumeister et al., 2001). Perceived as a weakness, this could lead to couples worrying about levels of a wife’s emotional investment in the marriage, or simply frustration with the mismatch. However, understanding that in addition to sexual desire men also report experiencing physical cues like hunger and thirst more often than women do (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), couples might be grateful for this male attunement to physical stimuli that provides a divine contrast to women’s relational responsiveness. It could be seen as a good (and this is a gender stereotype here) that a wife helps to slow down the sexual experience and increase savoring the experience, while a husband provides a steadier impetus for reconnection. Sexual desire is different for women and men in other ways as well. For example, women are more varied than males in their sexual response cycles; and not only are women more variable than other men, they are more different from other women, and are even more variable from themselves across their lifespan (Leavitt, Leonhardt et al., 2019). For example, women often experience physical sexual arousal before they report experiencing sexual desire, whereas men typically report feeling desire and then arousal (Leavitt, Leonhardt et al., 2019). And so again, what could appear to be “broken” might just be different.

Some researchers have attempted to destigmatize these male/female differences. Peplau (2003) has suggested that female sexual desire should be reconceptualized as “periodic” (instead of problematic) because it is not necessarily weaker than men’s, but it varies across the menstrual cycle, while the more stable male sexual desire does not have an analogous variable hormonal component (Peplau, 2003). These sexual differences extend into physical differences in sexual
capacity. Because women have a shorter refractory period than men and the capacity for multiple orgasms, it could be argued that women have a greater sexual capacity than men (Kontula & Miettinen, 2016). Again, researchers have called for more work to be done to examine how these differences in male and female sexuality might be normative instead of problematic (Chivers & Brotto, 2017), but this call can be answered on a couple level, and with a specific couple’s partner differences in mind. Husbands and wives can move toward sexual connection by considering the ways the divine strengths and differences both members of the couple bring to sex might be invitations to learn and grow together. Rather than problematizing sexual differences, challenges to sexual relatedness like different sexual response cycle patterns, different paths to arousal, and different levels of desire for sex can be used as opportunities to work toward developing Christlike love and equal partnership in a sexual relationship.

**How Relatedness Changes Over Time**

We seek relatedness throughout the lifespan, but how and why we want to relate to others should change as we grow. In the late 1970s, psychologist Dorothy Tennov studied the experience of falling in love, and termed the constellations of hormones and emotions *limerence* (Fisher, 1994). Limerence is that blissful period that couples initially experience, sometimes called the honeymoon phase. Individuals in the limerence phase reported spending up to 85–100% of their waking hours thinking about the wonders and perfections their partner possessed. Usually after about 18–24 months these initial hormone levels subside somewhat and we move from limerence into the attachment phase of a relationship where we see each other more clearly, and have to rely on our “heart, might, mind, and strength” (*Doctrine and Covenants*, 1835/1992, 4:2) to consciously create relatedness with our partner. The wonderful news is that even though
limerence will come to an end, it can make way for an even richer sense of mature marital
connection and intimacy than the initial period did.

Not only can emotional intimacy increase over the lifespan of a marriage, but our
capacity for sexual intimacy can increase as well. Contrary to the popular physical-matters-most
view that one’s sexual peak is in our twenties, Dr. Schnarch (2009) argues that maturity and
thoughtfulness improve sex vastly more than a youthful body can. “Most people never reach
their sexual prime, and those who do, don’t reach it until their forties, fifties, and sixties.
Profoundly meaningful sex is determined more by personal maturation than physiological reflex”
(p. 78). Dr. Finlayson-Fife agreed that a 20-year-old heart has not yet learned to love as well as a
60-year-old heart. She shared:

> Touching your spouse with all the familiarity, and also with the realization that you do
not know them, or own them. Cherishing all that they are—because we are infinite
creatures. It’s a sharing of beauty. It’s an issue of skill and heart. (Finlayson-Fife, 2020)

We can build our relational “skill and heart” and develop better sexual connection in marriage
over time.

Indeed, although sexual novelty can be a helpful element in experiencing great sex, it is
not the only component—or even a very important one in sexual satisfaction, according to
researchers (Kleinplatz et al., 2009). As sexual novelty decreases over the course of a marriage,
familiarity opens up new possibilities. Researchers studied the components of great sex—in
contrast to what popular culture claimed mattered most, like easy and instant gratification—and
identified key characteristics that were present in optimal sexual encounters. Almost all of the
components require a long-term investment and development with a trusted partner. For
example, the characteristics included being present, focused, and connected; sharing deep sexual
and erotic intimacy; engaging in clear communication and heightened empathy; and being able to experience vulnerability and surrender. When these elements were in place, sex was described as transcendent, blissful, peaceful, transformational, and healing (Kleinplatz et al., 2009). Intense physical sensation and chemistry are not as important as the characteristics that must be built on a foundation of Christlike love over an extended period of time in a committed sexual relationship.

Another way to improve sex over time includes enhancing or deepening the meanings we bring to sex. In a study that examined the meanings of sex in long-term relationships, one woman said that although sex in her relationship had become less frequent with age, there were compensating factors. She said that sex was “more meaningful now. It means more to me. Like before it was just an activity. But then, now it's more like an act of love. If you know what I mean, like it's not just sex, it's a real bond” (Hayfield & Clarke, 2012). We give sex its meaning, and as we “learn line upon line, precept upon precept” (Book of Mormon, 1830/1992, 2 Ne. 28:30) we can move into choosing more mature sexual meanings that can enhance our marital and spiritual growth. Pope John Paul II wrote about the power of thoughtfully choosing the meaning we give sex in marriage. He counseled that we should choose to give sex a high and holy meaning—not engaging in it for power, manipulation, or self-gratification (all reasons popular media might champion)—but rather that we choose to let it work for goodness in our relationship:

For the Creator, in giving men and women a rational nature and the capacity consciously to decide upon their own actions, thereby made it possible for them to choose freely the end to which sexual intercourse naturally leads. And where two persons can join in
choosing a certain good as their end there exists the possibility of love. (Wojtyla, 1993, p. 59)

Individuals might consider what meanings they have chosen to give sex in their marriage. Are they meanings that will build relatedness? Are they meanings that will build love?

**Relatedness Versus Happiness**

Relatedness can also be increased when we aim for connection instead of happiness in a marriage. Researchers (Zerwas & Ford, 2021) have recently examined the paradox of happiness: the more individuals make happiness their aim, the less likely they are to experience it, in both the short- and the long-term. Researchers have also found an important difference when looking at marital happiness versus marital meaning. When we aim to create a couple identity or connection (Fowers et al., 2016), we can visualize connection as the root of the tree that we nourish, and then happiness will be the fruit that we harvest from time to time (Galovan et al., 2021). Viktor Frankl wrote, “happiness cannot be pursued; it must ensue” (Frankl, 1959/1984, p. 162). If we seek individual happiness first and foremost in a marriage, we might inadvertently sell ourselves short—on that outcome and others.

Part of the issue with happiness as a primary goal is that it is associated with getting what we want, or with “taking pleasures in the present” mindset (Baumeister, 2018, p. 9). What might make one happiest in the moment is a quick sexual experience with little emotional investment, but that lacks long-term bonding power. The pursuit of creating connection, on the other hand, is future-oriented and holds a sense of meaning about the relationship that can endure over time. Focusing on connection in marriage means there is a long-term vision about the couplehood that is being built. Even though there will be disappointments and failures in the pursuit of connection, these are “part and parcel of a highly meaningful life” (Baumeister, 2018, p. 9).
Healthy expressions of religion can help couples develop a more connective approach to marriage. Researchers have found that religious individuals are more likely to believe in long-term marital commitment, and that belief in commitment can help overshadow temporary marital obstacles (Hui et al., 2007; Marks, 2005). The good news of the gospel for Latter-day Saints includes the fact that this connection can be eternal (The Church of Jesus Christ, 2021b), and LDS couples can benefit from focusing on creating connection in marriage rather than seeking happiness as an aim in and of itself.

There are also sexual aims that short-circuit the sexual experience in terms of what sex can potentially offer a couple. Viktor Frankl (1959/1984) also noted about sexuality, “The more a patient . . . directly strives for orgasm, i.e., sexual pleasure, the more this pursuit of sexual pleasure becomes self-defeating” (p. 163). More recent researchers agree that when sex becomes overly goal-oriented and focused on specific physical outcomes as markers of success or happiness (such as orgasm), the sexual experience paradoxically suffers (Leavitt, Leonhardt et al., 2021; Rowland et al., 2018). In fact, it is possible that the more orgasm becomes the focus, the less likely women are to enjoy sex. Researchers have found that for women, the most commonly endorsed reasons for difficulty in reaching orgasm are stress, insufficient arousal, and lack of time during sex (Rowland et al., 2018). These obstacles are generally under the control of a couple, and might be resolved through a focus on creating connection during sex.

Likewise, aiming to make sex as physically intense or rewarding as possible often means that the full potential of transcendent, nourishing sex is not realized (Kleinplatz et al., 2009). Our aims can shortchange us when we aim too low or at the wrong target. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland (1988) warned that trying to focus only on the physical in the act of sex is to fragment our very selves and rob sexuality of its bonding power. Indeed, heavy use of pornography—or an intense
focus on the physical elements of sex while dulling the spiritual and emotional meanings of sex—is linked to decreased desire for sex with one’s partner, decreased sexual satisfaction with one’s partner, and increased solitary sexual behavior (Wright et al., 2021). There are clear benefits to seeking connection in sex instead of focusing on short-term physical sexual outcomes. When couples experience sexuality as a divine gift wherein they can build a unique and lasting connection, the outcomes of happiness and sexual satisfaction will often naturally follow.

**Expanding Visions of Connection**

Most religions offer resources in terms of how to better love and connect, and how to create a sanctified sexual relationship. Building on gospel principles and learning to balance autonomy and relatedness can help us connect in marriage. However, there is also the possibility that the “good news” of the gospel has been muddled over time in the area of sexual connection, or that well-intentioned but false traditions surrounding sex have made their way into religious culture. Researchers have suggested that religion can be limiting to sexuality through creating sexual shame and guilt (Murray et al., 2007), and that religious people are more likely than non-religious people to embrace the limiting view that sex is appropriate for procreation but not for pleasure (Woo et al., 2012). One scholar argued that sex and Christianity were set at odds with each other as early as St. Augustine (354–430 AD), who taught that the soul should rule over the body, and that the body, with all its physical desires, needed to be subjugated in order to achieve righteousness (Sellers, 2017). However, the gospel of Jesus Christ offers us a template for transcendent marital sexual connection, including the fact that our bodies are foundational to being able to connect sexually. Some of these have already been discussed, and a handful will help us conclude our discussion.
In the Church of Jesus Christ, sex is seen as an act of religious and spiritual importance, and has even been compared to the healing, renewing, and binding ordinance of the sacrament. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland (1988) called marital sex, “a very real sacrament of the highest order, a union not only of a man and a woman but very much the union of that man and woman with God.” A marital sexual relationship is one in which we try to become one with another, much like we aim for spiritual unity in our relationship with our God. As we engage in this unity with a spouse, we are also gaining “access to his power” through the act of not only acknowledging “his divinity, but we quite literally take something of that divinity to ourselves” (Holland, 1988, A Holy Sacrament section). Marriage is a relationship in which we have to give away certain things in order to find unity; likewise, with God, we have to lose the selfish parts of ourselves to find the real and solid parts of ourselves.

In the same way that Sunday sacramental ordinance can lose meaning and its potential to change us if we fail to approach it thoughtfully, we might consider whether we are continuing to progress in our sexual relationship rather than taking for granted that this growth will occur on its own through mindless repetition. If we approach marriage as a sacrament, and we want to use that moment to connect with our spouse and with God, how could that change our sexual experiences? Might we be less goal-oriented and instead more inclusive and expansive in our touch? Might we slow down and be more mindful as we engage in the experience? If we were to approach sex as a sacrament, what would that mean about how positive and nourishing that experience has the potential to be—in both physical and spiritual terms?

Another salient element of the sex-positive template LDS theology offers us is that it does not condemn the body. We understand that the spirit and the body form the human soul (Holland, 1988). This belief in the importance of a body, and in an embodied God sets us apart
from other Christian faiths. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland reminded us that it is this belief that sometimes excludes us by some from Christianity altogether. And yet we know that embodiment goes hand in hand with divinity, “Any who dismiss the concept of an embodied God dismiss both the mortal and the resurrected Christ” (Holland, 2007, p. 42). The fact that Christ reunited His spirit with His physical body is crucial to our salvation.

We recognize that our bodies are central to our salvation as well. We can remember that Christ did not attempt to deny his embodiment, but utilized it to teach, love, heal, and connect.

The life of Jesus as told by the evangelists is a very physical one; he was not a philosopher, simply engaging the minds of people on his wandering through the land. Here was a man who held people . . . and cherished people back to life. Here was an embodied and incarnate being. (Isherwood & Stuart, 1998, p. 11)

As Christ embraced his own physicality, we can embrace ours: our embodiment is a privilege and blessing, and our bodies can accomplish great good. Indeed, “we believe, as did the ancient prophets and apostles, in an embodied—but certainly glorified—God” (Holland, 2007). One Christian sex therapist explained that a body “is the pen with which we write our life story, beginning with our first breath and ending at death. The body gives a physical representation of the things that happen in the ‘inner chambers’ of our thoughts, desires, reason, emotion” (Sellers, 2017, p. 65). Because religion is sometimes tied to the experience of sexual shame (Murray et al., 2007), we might need to reframe our religious thinking about the power we possess to learn and grow in love through our marital sexual relationship.

Possessing a body means we will experience sexual desire, and desire is foundational to sexual sanctification. Although we must learn to control this desire, it is also a source of potential
goodness and joy. One relationship and sex therapist who works with religious clients explained that religionists might have a conflicted relationship with sexual desire. She wrote:

Christians in particular, will bring beliefs from the past that may subtly block the flow of desire, beliefs such as “desire is bad” or “desire is dangerous” or “desire will get me into trouble,” or “desire will pull me away from God” . . . But if a client can be invited into feeling their desire as good and feeling their desire for their partner as good, appreciating the desire, and deciding if and how to express it in a way that honors their core beliefs and values, it can be a nourishing gift. (Sellers, 2017, p. 127)

Sometimes LDS adults confuse keeping our sexual desires within proper boundaries with repressing them completely. Sexual sanctification very much includes the idea of sexual play, fun, and passion. Bruce and Marie Hafen (1994) offered: “God is the author of our passions. If we ‘bride’ them by the bounds he has set, our passions will be fulfilled” (Finding the Abundant Life section). Our sexual passions are God-given, and we should learn to exercise the power to decide how and when we respond to those passions—which passions we nurture, how, and why.

Our theology maintains that neither our body nor our spirit should be singularly privileged in sex. To be sure, sexual energy is powerful enough to consume us if we allow it (Holland, 1988), but when aimed to create connection with a spouse, LDS doctrine teaches us that our sexuality can bless us in immeasurable ways.

**Conclusion**

Our LDS theology is one of connection. We hope to be “united, bound, linked, tied, welded, sealed, married” (Holland, 1988, “A Symbol” section). As we aim to create that connection, to become literally “one flesh” (*King James Bible*, 1769/1992, Mark 10:8), our marriages will test, try, and prove us. Through those very challenges in our marriages, including
in the marital sexual relationship, we are offered an incomparable tutelage in how to love one another in more Christlike ways. To truly know and be known by a spouse is a privilege earned through a process of vulnerability, courage, and work, of working to build both autonomy and relatedness in a harmonious balance. It is also the path to joy. We are encouraged in Proverbs to utilize marital sex to bring us happiness, “Let thy fountain be blessed: and rejoice with the wife of thy youth” (King James Bible, 1769/1992, Prov. 5:18). Our level of connection and pleasure is mostly up to us. One LDS author posed this question about relationships: “If the same sociality that exists among us here has echoes in eternity, the question I need to ask myself is this: What are my relationships becoming?” (Goldberg, 2021, para. 40).

Our relationships will largely become what we are willing to make of them. We can learn to connect in marriage in more powerful ways. We can become more autonomous through paying careful attention to our day-to-day choices and taking responsibility for them, choosing to give autonomously, and recognizing that as we continue to develop our selfhood we must do so with the recognition that we exist in a larger moral context. We can balance our autonomy with our desires for relatedness as we strive to mature in our ability to relate to one another, see the divine in one another, and focus on long-term connection in marriage over short-term happiness. Basing our lives on gospel principles can help us finding that balance between autonomy and relatedness and can help us achieve more sanctified sex.

We not only yearn for connection, we are commanded to create it. We ache for it from the beginnings of our lives when our very survival depends on it, and then throughout our lives when our health and happiness do. The pursuit of connection should be a primary concern in our lives, as critical as it is to our growth and progress. When Christ was questioned about the most
important feature of the law, and therefore where we should spend the most important energy of our lives, he taught his listeners that our focus should be on love.

Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (King James Bible, 1769/1992, Matt. 22:37-40)

Prophets, poets, and philosophers have mused about love before and since Christ showed us that love is the way. More recently, the poet Jane Hirshfield (1988) claimed in her poem “For What Binds Us,”¹ that “when two people have loved each other” there is a connection that “makes of them a single fabric / that nothing can tear or mend” (p. 19). The gospel and social science teach us that when it is truly love that binds us, we can enhance marital sexual connection.

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¹ I am indebted to Maria Popova, author of “The Marginalian” blog for introducing me to Jane Hirshfield’s poem that inspired the title of this manuscript. In a late-2021 post titled, “Gravity, Grace, and What Binds Us: Poet Jane Hirshfield’s Timeless Hymn to Love and the Proud Scars of the Heart,” Popova writes compellingly that it is, indeed, love that binds us. https://www.themarginalian.org/2021/11/11/jane-hirshfield-for-what-binds-us/
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Chapter 3: How Sexuality and Religion Intersect in Highly Religious Families:

Implications for Clinicians

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Abstract

Using data from interviews with 198 highly religious Muslim, Christian, or Jewish families in the U.S., we investigated how religion informs sexual relationships, sexual practices, and sexual beliefs in family life. Guided by Marks’s method (2015), a team-based coding approach, participants’ comments about sexuality and sexual relationships were coded and organized into four themes that illuminated how religion and sexuality intersect among highly religious couples and families. Themes included (a) boundaries and rules around sex, (b) purpose of sex, (c) navigating culture and media, and (d) concerns regarding children. Implications for practitioners are discussed, including understanding the most common ways sex and religion intersect in highly religious families, and the importance of asking clients to what degree their faith influences their sexual relationships, practices, and beliefs.

Keywords: religion, sexuality, religious dualities, sex therapy, couples therapy, family therapy
How Sexuality and Religion Intersect in Highly Religious Families:  

Implications for Clinicians

As many as 54% of U.S. adults reported that religion is “very important” to them, and another 24% said it is “somewhat important” (Pew, 2014), making it highly likely clinicians will work with those who are religious. Religion plays a role in how individuals make sense of and behave in the world, including sexual behavior (Farmer et al., 2009). Even so, many clinicians report receiving little to no training in effectively incorporating religion into therapeutic treatment (Marterella & Brock, 2008). Further adding to this complexity, religious experience is highly varied, and how individuals approach their religion can also impact their experience of sexuality—for better or worse (Dollahite, Marks, Dalton, 2018). As has been observed in both research and therapeutic work, an individual’s religion might play a role in their sexual problems—or help adherents find a path to sexual satisfaction and healing (Dew et al., 2018). Thus, in some cases, religion can seem simultaneously connected to both the confusion and the clearer perspective of sexuality for individuals, couples, and families.

Due to these varying outcomes, we investigated how religion intersects with sexuality among religious couples through a religious duality framework (Dollahite, Marks, Dalton, 2018), examining how religion both helps and harms. We propose that utilizing the perspective of religious dualities can be useful for those helping individuals navigate the intersection of sex and religion. We also provide recommendations to help clinicians enhance their practice.

Religious Dualities

Dollahite, Marks, and Dalton (2018) proposed that religion can both help and harm families, and their model of religious dualities is helpful in examining the role of religion in sexuality. They argue that religion might generate and address relational struggles, through
creating disunity or abuses (e.g., a zealous spouse who criticizes the other for not living up to religious proscriptions), or benefitting familial relationships through religious beliefs and practices (e.g., a supportive spouse vocalizes their best wishes for their partner through prayer). Religion in families might also be relationally divisive or unifying. For example, a parent overly dedicated to volunteer church service might cause their spouse or children to feel neglected. Conversely, religious traditions and rituals can provide family unity and a sense of shared meaning. Having established that religion can both help and harm, we consider ways that religion may affect sexual processes among highly religious couples and families.

**Boundaries, Rules, and Purposes of Sex**

Religion can influence and even regulate the where, when, and who of sex, and typically supports fidelity to marital vows (Allsop et al., 2021). Some have called sexual regulation—or setting the bounds of sexual behavior and attitudes—the central or even “ultimate issue” of religion, as well as one of the most divisive ones (Endsjø, 2012, p. 12). Although religious boundaries and rules surrounding sex often add to familial and marital stability, such as the expectation of sexual fidelity and modesty in dress, it has historically been the duty of women to be the keepers of these boundaries (Allsop et al., 2021). It is possible that religious support of sexual boundaries might add to women’s sexual enjoyment through mechanisms such as sanctifying sex and increasing marital commitment (Dew et al., 2018). And yet, these boundaries might be restricting if they morph into benevolent sexism where a “good woman” is one who is a successful sexual gatekeeper (Haggard et al., 2019).

The purpose of sex in highly religious couples is also nuanced. Although Adam and Eve were commanded to “multiply, and replenish the earth” (Genesis 1:28; KJV), religions vary in terms of whether sex is most important for procreation or pleasure (Endsjø, 2012). Some
researchers have indicated that many Christian sects promote the thinking that God wants married couples to enjoy sex (Burke, 2016), whereas others have found that being highly religious can increase sexual shame and guilt (Murray et al., 2007). In summary, religion is an influence on sexual behavior for many religious persons—and its influence is often salient enough to warrant clinical sensitivity and awareness.

**Navigating Culture and Media, and Concerns About Children**

Even with movement toward cultural gender equality in many nations, researchers have argued that most religions promote a gender hierarchy, and that highly religious individuals are more likely to have attitudes that are gender unequal (Schnabel, 2016). On the other side of this religious duality, however, scholars have suggested that religions often present an ideology of women and men inhabiting different but complementary roles that create a sense of completeness in a family (Leavitt, Allsop, Price et al., 2021), and that the doctrines of religions are often more egalitarian than they appear in observed practice (Leavitt, Allsop, Clarke et al., 2021). The idea that religion can both help and harm relationships is found in the way religion and sexuality intersects with culture, and how religious individuals navigate this intersection.

Religion can also impact family arrangements, including guiding parents in their approach to family roles, with religious parents also concerned about how to transmit religious values to their children (Dollahite, Marks, Kear et al., 2018). This desire can guide parental choices when the culture surrounding the religious subculture is not supportive of religious values or is in conflict with them. For example, religiosity has been associated with higher levels of parental media monitoring when parental values were threatened by media (Padilla-Walker et al., 2012). Another tension has been found in parent-child communication surrounding sexuality.
Namely, religious parents tend to speak less to their children about sexuality and contraception, and when they do so they generally communicate more negative messages (Regnerus, 2016).

**Current Study**

The intersection of religion and sex has been investigated quantitatively in several areas such as satisfaction, behavior, identity formation, and pornography use (Leonhardt et al., 2019). However, to our knowledge no studies have qualitatively examined highly religious families for the most salient elements of their sexual attitudes, beliefs, and practices. While we will remain aware of religious dualities, we echo Levand (2021) and others who have noted the importance of examining the positive possibilities that religious doctrine and teachings hold for guiding religionists toward more constructive views and experiences with their sexuality. That is, “understanding how to harness the positive power of dualities while more carefully navigating negative and damaging approaches to dualities can be a vitally important asset for families and professionals striving to help them” (Dollahite, Marks, Dalton, 2018, p. 238). We endeavor to examine positive and negative connections between sexuality and religion in order to help clinicians working at this complex intersection, and to illuminate how to help these individuals and couples establish positive sexual relationships, practices, and beliefs.

**Methods**

Participants were part of the national American Families of Faith project. Our sample consisted of exemplar families that were identified using a two-stage process. First, religious leaders recommended families in their congregations they considered as “strong in their faith” and “successful . . . in their family relationships.” Second, these families were asked about their willingness to participate in interviews and ninety percent of the families consented. We also used participant referral sampling among less represented faiths (e.g., Islam, Orthodox Judaism).
We interviewed a total of 198 families (N = 476 individuals). The major Abrahamic faith traditions of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, that included a total of about 20 traditions/branches are represented in our sample.

Religious research in the social sciences has been criticized for repeatedly employing predominantly White Christian samples (Mahoney, 2010). We attempted to address and overcome this limitation with purposive sampling. Ethnic and racial minority families were oversampled and comprise 51% of the total sample. Minority families were oversampled both because they are understudied and generally more religious.

Our sample was both ethnically and religiously diverse (see Table 1). Families who participated in this study were from 17 states in the U.S., representing all eight socio-religious regions of the nation identified by Silk and Walsh (2006), including the Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, Mountain West, New England, Northwest, Pacific, the South/Gulf Coast, and Southern Crossroads. Socioeconomic status varied widely and educational experience ranged from GED to PhD/MD. Most participant families attended religious services at least once per week, reported donating an average of 7% of their income to their religion, and spent 11 hours per week in religious activities (including personal and home-based worship). In summary, the sample was characterized by (a) high level of religious commitment, (b) rich racial and ethnic diversity, (c) religious diversity, (d) geographic and regional diversity, and (e) socioeconomic diversity.

Analysis

Throughout the semi-structured in-home interviews, families were asked a wide variety of questions about their experiences with religion and family life. Although no questions were

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2 Details about the sample are publicly accessible on the American Families of Faith national research project website (https://americanfamiliesoffaith.byu.edu/) and are used here with permission.
specifically asked regarding religion and sexual relationships, participants spontaneously volunteered information about this connection. To understand this connection, we conducted a keyword search in NVivo (Version 12) utilizing words such as “sex,” “sexy,” “sexual,” “chastity,” “faithful,” and “procreate,” and then combined search results into a single keyword node that was further analyzed and coded. Two researchers scanned the data and removed hits irrelevant to sexual relationships before the node was further analyzed. The final version of the node was found 223 times across 104 interviews.

Two trained university undergraduate coders analyzed the data in a multi-stage coding process based on Marks's method (2015), which calls for coders to alternately “lead out” in sharing their recorded codes/analyses. Beginning with open coding, defined as “reading through an interview and recording . . . a brief conceptual ‘code’ that reflects what the participant is discussing” (Marks, 2015, p. 501), two researchers independently read through excerpts contained in the keyword node and searched for corresponding codes. Then, the researchers identified core themes (Marks, 2015) by sharing codes and discussing overlap the codes identified, as well as the frequency of codes. After deliberation, the researchers settled on four themes related to sexuality including boundaries and rules, purpose of sex, culture and media, and concerns regarding children.

Next, the two researchers again coded the keyword node—specifically coding for the four core themes identified—to confirm the centrality of the core themes and provide frequencies of each theme (a numerical content analysis). Upon completing their own coding, they independently read their partner’s coding and took note of any coding by the partner that they agreed or disagreed with. They then discussed and reconciled differences in coding. Disagreements were counted for purposes of interrater reliability if, after the two researchers had
discussed their perspectives, they still remained in disagreement. The interrater reliability for the
coding of the four core themes was 92%. The two researchers' files were merged once the
researchers finished the partner review process.

Findings

The majority of participants spontaneously brought up issues surrounding the intersection
between sex and religion. These were coded into four core themes: (a) boundaries and rules
around sex, (b) purpose of sex, (c) navigating culture and media, and (d) concerns regarding
children. In Table 2, we present precise frequency counts for these four themes. All participants’
names are pseudonyms.

Theme 1: Boundaries and Rules Around Sex (N = 151 coded references)

In order to convey the depth and breadth of participants comments regarding religious
regulations and boundaries surrounding sexuality, this theme includes six subthemes: (a) fidelity
and vows, (b) women as boundary setters, (c) modesty, (d) contraception and family planning,
(e) discrepancies in interpreting religious rules, and (f) divinely set boundaries.

Subtheme 1a: Fidelity and Vows

Participants frequently explained an expectation of marital and sexual fidelity connected
to their religious beliefs. For instance, when asked about the “deepest spiritual beliefs about
marriage,” Emily, a White Baptist woman, responded that her expectation of sexual faithfulness
in marriage was informed by her religious understanding: “Fidelity, I see as being tied, for me,
primarily to my beliefs and to my relationship with God.” Enoch, a White Presbyterian man,
similarly expressed his expectation of marital fidelity as tied to religion:
We made vows to be a couple, to be true to each other, so I have a commitment to monogamy and fidelity. I think it would be easy to rationalize out of that if a person didn’t have some beliefs to base that on.

This expectation of marital faithfulness was something that religious couples viewed as foundational to marital satisfaction and success. A Middle Eastern Muslim husband, Ali, shared the following about his relationship to his wife and the expectation of fidelity:

Uncertainty and stress are out of the picture. The second thing that also comes with it is responsibility in front of God. And in Islam . . . there is a great responsibility of taking care of your wife’s spiritual and physical needs, and protection and love.

Jade, an Asian American Christian wife, responded that her shared religious views with her husband not only provided her a “shared vision” that was good for their marriage, but also provided an essential component of having a divine presence in the relationship. “[T]rusting in Him [God], and [having] faith in each other, you don’t worry that the other person will stray or have an affair, or something like that.” Cassandra, a White member of the Church of Jesus Christ (LDS), spoke similarly of the bonds fidelity and vows offered her in marriage,

It’s sort of a three-way partnership with God being sort of a party to making this marriage work, and to helping us through this life. And obviously we’ve covenanted with each other very specifically about being faithful to each other and about helping each other throughout this life and then beyond.

Fidelity and vows were mentioned often in conjunction with individuals’ spiritual beliefs about marriage and seemed to form a protective and foundational function.
Subtheme 1b: Women as Boundary Setters

Some couples and families communicated that women in religious traditions often perform the function of sexual-boundary setters. One White Jewish wife, Miriam, stated, “Women have control over the sex life in the marriage.” Another White Jewish woman, Dalia, mentioned niddah, the Jewish period of sexual abstinence from the onset of menstruation until after a purification ritual (mikvah) two weeks later. She felt the practice gave women a spiritual ownership over their own sexuality. “Women see this as a liberating personal venture and a moment to be with oneself, to be feeling pure. And they find it very spiritual.” Many couples and families who mentioned that women were sexual-boundary setters found it empowering for women.

In contrast, one Episcopalian couple (both members of the couple were White) spoke about the way female sexual-boundary setting can become problematic, or at least conceptualized that way. Greg and Kristin expressed their frustration about popular culture promoting a damaging stereotype of women as boundary setters. Greg said, “If you’re too much into today’s culture . . . That can really screw you up. [On TV] the way they talk to each other. It’s horrible.” His wife Kristin, agreed, “It’s [supposed to be] funny that the husband’s a big dope and the wife never gives it up. . . . And the girls are always holding back sex and using it to get what they want.”

Some spoke of women as sexual-boundary setters in an empowering way, and appreciated that their religious ideals supported what they saw as a healthy approach to sexuality in marriage. However, there was also the notion that a potential problem with this expectation was a reinforcement of an unhealthy stereotype and burden placed unfairly on women.
**Subtheme 1c: Modesty**

Modesty as a religious sexual boundary or rule was mentioned by participants. Although thoughts on modesty were often mentioned in conjunction with standards of dress for women, men were also mentioned in this theme. Modesty also reached beyond standards of dress and included standards of behavior for adults.

One White Orthodox Jewish man, Asher, mentioned his *tzitzit* (the fringes attached to a prayer shawl worn underneath the clothing), and how this helped him practice sexual restraint:

> [T]he purpose . . . is to not be led astray, sexually . . . . If your eyes are straying on other women, you’re supposed to look at the tzitzit and remember. That’s a relationship with God. . . . The *tzitzit* is a reminder that there’s a higher purpose and that there’s something else I’m supposed to be doing. And it’s related to . . . being faithful to my wife.

Another White Jewish husband, Zachary, also spoke of the power of modesty as a way of life, and as a way to increase marital intimacy.

> If . . . there’s no modesty so that you’re parading around with everything hanging out for the whole world to see, and you’re . . . hugging and kissing and this and that . . . what’s special that’s reserved for you as a couple?

A Black Muslim wife, Sabina, spoke of modesty as a way of properly interacting with others.

> “When I do talk with people of the opposite gender, it’s just that I do have to keep this barrier in mind and keep my modesty in mind.” Modesty in both dress and action was addressed as an important boundary that was seen as a way to build trust and keep marriages and families strong.

**Subtheme 1d: Contraception and Family Planning**

Another sexual boundary and rule participants spontaneously addressed was how birth control had influenced sexuality in their marriage. Many religions have recommendations for
family planning, and the ideal method of birth control often varies according to religious
denomination.

In discussing birth control, several couples seemed willing to depart somewhat from the
teachings of their faith. For example, a White Catholic husband, Brandon, said,

You don’t have to believe that it’s a sin to practice safe sex to use birth control. And the
Catholic church, of course, frowns against it. Frowns, but we’ve talked to priests who
basically laugh when it comes up . . . so I don’t think it’s wrong to do that. I’ve never
liked people telling me what I have to do.

Others were against birth control altogether, and saw this choice as a matter of faith that blessed
their sexuality. For example, Declan, another White Catholic husband, said,

[T]aking birth control is . . . turning yourself and perhaps your spouse into an object. . . .
It’s taking away your need to keep your wits about you, to figure your life out better and
to act more in accord with what is naturally true about you as a human being.

In general, highly religious couples and families agreed that having children was an
important part of family life—even a religious obligation. However, although religion seemed to
inform how most couples approached this boundary around sex, many of them established their
own boundaries.

**Subtheme 1e: Discrepancies in Interpreting Religious Rules**

Participant couples sometimes disagreed on interpretations of religious boundaries and
rules surrounding sexuality. Not only were there differences expressed between couples and
families on issues such as contraception, abortion, and homosexuality, but there were varying
levels of tolerance expressed for others holding differing views.
Yamina, a Middle Eastern Muslim woman, expressed that her opinions about other Muslim women who interpret religious boundaries and rules differently than she does have changed over time. “At first, I was very sad to see a Muslim woman not wearing Hijab, but now it is okay . . . . She is a different person than me.” Again, even within religious denominations there were differing opinions. One White Jewish wife, Hannah, said,

I just think there are things about any religion. Judaism is one of them that if you take the practices literally that they can be harmful not just to marriage but relationships in general. Like . . . what the Torah says about women. [T]hese things can be somewhat offensive to me.

Several Christian participants believed the Bible was the guide to regulating and informing their sexuality. However, a White Catholic woman, Anne, explained how even biblical writings were open to interpretation. “I think the danger . . . comes when you interpret it [in an immature way]” and then explained that over time she has perceived a “truer message.”

Many participants indicated that even individuals within a specific religion could have different interpretations of religious boundaries and rules about sexuality—and the array of interviews in our sample confirmed and illustrated this reality.

**Subtheme 1f: Divinely Set Boundaries**

Many participants commented that the sexual rules and boundaries that they observed were set forth by God, and that these divinely set boundaries were given for their own benefit. Yuusif, a Muslim man originally from India, said,

God [said], “Here are the things you can do. Here are things you shouldn’t do.” And now, if I follow these rules, then I’ll be successful in this life, and successful in the hereafter.
Now when God told me in this life, “Don’t [have sexual relations outside marriage],” I fully believe that I don’t do this, because it’s not good for me.

Kimberly, a White member of the Church of Jesus Christ (LDS), said fidelity within marriage was essential, and complete chastity before marriage was commanded by God. She said,

That’s hard for a lot of people to understand. The concept of total chastity before marriage seems like the greatest sacrifice that any person in our modern country could make. But . . . I don’t feel that that is a sacrifice, I feel that that’s a way of ensuring further blessings for my life.

Participants reported that adhering to God’s laws surrounding sexuality took discipline, and yet many also said that maintaining these boundaries was vital to lasting happiness.

**Theme 2: Purpose of Sex (N = 91 coded references)**

The second core theme in our interviews with highly religious couples and families had to do with the purpose of sex. This theme was rich enough to be broken into six subthemes: (a) the sanctity of sex, (b) the expression of sex is limited to marriage, (c) sex has a strengthening power within marriage, (d) sex is for procreation, (e) marriage is more than sex, and (f) negative messages about sex that come from religion. (For an in-depth examination of the purpose of sex in highly religious couples and families, see Leavitt, Allsop, Clarke et al., 2021.)

**Subtheme 2a: The Sanctity of Sex**

Our analyses revealed that sex was often viewed as a sacred part of marriage. One Turkish Muslim husband, Daamin, said, “Sexual interaction between married couples is considered worship in Islam, and you get rewarded in terms of good deeds.” An Orthodox Christian husband named Charles stated that sex can serve the purpose of bonding partners and
transcending the mundane in marriage: “It’s the angelic life . . . it’s not about sex anymore. The bond between us sexually [is] only a physical expression of that. It’s something far beyond that.” That is, sex, when divinely ordained by God, can be sanctified. A White Episcopalian woman named Kristin mentioned that there was a symbolic and religious beauty in the union that sex can offer, “So the more you realize that and how there’s the two, man and woman, and then the union is the fullness of God.” Sex that was seen as sanctified was also reported to be joyful and transcendent.

Subtheme 2b: Sex Limited to Marriage

Participants also spoke about their view that sex should be an expression of love realized only with the bounds of marriage. One Arab-American Muslim husband, Talib, said of limiting sex to marriage, “Sex, outside of marriage, is a very big sin.” An important element to couples was that committed marital sex was a powerful way to bond and unify a marriage relationship. A Latina Catholic woman named Aurelia said,

I think God’s purpose for creating families is to have a way of having humans be connected to one another in an institutional way. And create this sense of family as an institution. Of providing the place of creating and procreation.

Subtheme 2c: Strengthening Power of Sex

Many participants found power, strength, and purpose in their marital sexual relationship. Sexuality, inasmuch as it brought joy and transcendence and resulted in family relationships with children, was seen as a powerful way to strengthen a marital union. A Black Christian wife, Destiny, expressed the joy she experienced with her husband when they viewed sex in this way.

He is my lover and he’s an awesome lover. He caters to me and my needs. And he takes the time to make sure that my needs are met. So he’s not selfish in the bedroom
[Laughter.] . . . And our children, we always said to them . . . “If you want to know what’s going on, Mama and Daddy are just keeping Jesus happy.”

**Subtheme 2d: Sex for Procreation**

Participants of various faiths expressed that an important purpose of sex was procreation. Joel, an Orthodox Jewish teen son, said, “Well, there was you know rule number one: Make more.” Martha, a White Lutheran wife and mother, when discussing the purposes of marriage, said, “Well, obviously procreation, fill the earth, in [the second chapter of] Genesis.”

However, not all the comments from participants about sex for procreative purposes were positive. Some mentioned that confining sex to procreative purposes could be problematic. A White Greek Orthodox husband named Neal remarked, “If you were to truly live an Orthodox life, you’d have prayers every night, you’d do vigils all the time, you might not even have intimate relation[s] except for procreation.” Another White Orthodox husband named Russell, said,

I’m picking on the Catholics here, but the idea that for example, human sexuality is only for procreation I think is very dangerous to marriages. One of our fathers, John Chrysostom, says it’s for *two* things: Children and the increase of love.

**Subtheme 2e: Marriage Is More than Sex**

Many participants emphasized that the purpose of marriage was not only for sex. One Irish-American Catholic father named Brian said, “I think love is a choice. . . . And it’s not fireworks; it’s not [just] sex [all the time]. And then you *stick* to that choice.” Although sex was seen as an enhancement to a strong marriage, it was not seen as the main purpose of it.
Subtheme 2f: Negative Messages

Not all participants had experienced a positive nexus of religion and sexuality in their lives. The purpose of sex, for some, had been reportedly marred by religious experience. One White Lutheran man named Aaron explained,

I would say for me yes, all the parochial education, unfortunately, I think, has had a negative effect on me. . . . I think that it totally ruins my whole idea of sexuality. . . . The education that I got . . . was to just, ignore [sex], and have shame about it. I think it has hurt our marriage. And it certainly has closed me up.

Many participants believed that although marriage was the ideal and divinely ordained place to create a family, the idea that sex is only for procreation was problematic. In addition, some reported that religious regulation of sexuality stifled sexual enjoyment and increased sexual shame. Although not all religious messaging regarding the purpose of sex was positive, most couples believed there was religious support for the idea that sex should be an enjoyable, bonding, and transcendent experience in marriage.

Theme 3: Navigating Culture and Media (N = 72 coded references)

A third core theme was Navigating Culture and Media. Many participants mentioned their perception that living a religious lifestyle typically meant they held more conservative sexual values than those around them. Participants reported grappling with this disparity. Declan, a White Catholic husband, spoke of the difficulty of navigating “mainstream” media because it felt anti-family:

Some of the things that are on television . . . teaches you to see a woman as a sex object and that’s something that you should be chasing after, not loving. Just a “love them and
leave them” mentality. . . . I think [these things] challenge your religion. And that’s the devil’s way of coming in here and trying to undo what God’s put together.

Many participants seemed to feel that negative media was omnipresent. A White Presbyterian husband, Andy, said, “The media . . . conveys messages not according to my religion, and it’s not even according to many other people’s religion. Media is becoming a problem, and it invades everybody’s privacy in their home.”

Several participants spoke of how their religion provided a guide to navigating the surrounding culture and their media use that they felt strengthened their marriage and family. One woman, a Latina member of the Church of Jesus Christ (LDS) named Maria said, “Our church doesn’t believe in pornography and to me that is such a blessing.” An Arab-American Muslim mother, Aarifah, reported of her children, “We’ve asked them not to watch movies that would be harmful to their mind and their soul and their spirit.” For many participants, media and the culture it emanated from were challenges to navigate, and religion offered a desirable protective barrier from mainstream culture for most participants in our study.

Theme 4: Concerns Regarding Children (N = 59 coded references)

Several participants shared their concerns and suggestions about how to transmit religious and sexual values to their children. These considerations comprise the fourth core theme. A Black Catholic mother, Samantha, addressed parental teaching regarding sexuality:

We’re hoping, praying, that we’ve given them good minds, good brains, to make the right choice, and do the right thing, and knowing that there are going to be mistakes made, but then if that mistake is made, they’ll go, “I shouldn’t be doing this, this isn’t right.”

Several parents expressed this same principle of guiding their children in the teaching process versus forcing or controlling them into any kind of predetermined outcome. Hasan, an
Asian Muslim father, remarked about sexual education of his children, “Maybe right now, they are under my control. I can dictate what they do: don’t do this, do this. I can control it, but I believe the better approach for my children is to educate them.” Many participants advocated parental guidance but not parental force.

Some parents had rituals to teach children religious sexual values, like purchasing special jewelry to encourage children to live out the family’s beliefs. A White Lutheran family explained:

*Jenny (daughter):* [There’s] a ring that our dad buys for us for our 16th birthday . . .

*Martha (mother):* She’s just about to turn 16 in four days, so she’s excited.

*Jenny:* It’s kind of a covenant between the girl and God, the girl and her future husband . . . to remain pure until marriage.

Many participants did not address parent-child discussion of sexuality but the parents who addressed the topic seemed to see themselves as the primary teachers and transmitters of religious sexual values, as opposed to expecting religious leaders to do this vital work for them.

**Discussion**

Among the diverse religious families we interviewed, we found four core themes in participants’ discussions regarding the intersection of religion and sexuality. Namely, they addressed both the problems they encountered as well as the power religion offered them (Dollahite, Marks, Dalton, 2018). Although the semi-structured interview questionnaire had no scripted questions about sex, over half of the families (104 of 198; 53%) brought up the topic of sexuality spontaneously. We now turn to some clinical implications of our findings.
Clinical Implication One: Ask and Understand

Participants’ willingness to spontaneously speak about the intersection between sex and religion indicated that many highly religious couples do not avoid, shun, shame, or problematize sexual experience, but seek to find in it meaning and understanding. However, clinicians report receiving insufficient clinical training in incorporating religion into therapy, and tend to be less religious than average Americans, potentially increasing their hesitancy to address religion in therapy (Marterella & Brock, 2008). Thankfully, “It is not necessary for therapists to be experts in comparative religion” (Post & Wade, 2009, p. 139) to treat religious clients effectively. What seems vital is a willing openness to respectfully engage with religiosity as the client desires and to strive to understand how a client’s religion informs their worldview, including their perspective on their sexual relationship.

Therefore, the first clinical implication of this study invites clinicians to be willing to ask their religious clients about and understand the ways their religion and sexuality intersect. If therapists do not ask clients how religion impacts them, clients might not feel welcome to explore these influences in therapy, influences that may be central to their life experience.

Boundaries and Rules

The theme mentioned most often identified in participants’ responses was Boundaries and Rules. Sexual relations as an expression within marriage and practices to safeguard fidelity were part of this theme. Couples committed to fidelity reported satisfaction and stability (Fincham, 2007), and, in particular, women reported a sense of freedom in connection with this boundary. However, some reported a frustration with the burden this expectation inequitably placed upon women. Clinicians might ask religious clients about their experience with religious boundaries and rules with questions such as “Do religious boundaries and rules affect your sexual attitudes and behaviors?” Or in order to understand how religion impacts the boundaries
and rules of a client’s sexuality, “Do you have religious boundaries that might be helpful or harmful to your sexual relationship?”

**Purpose of Sex**

Participants’ discussions of *Purpose of Sex* revealed beliefs about sexual relations having divine and/or higher purposes. These beliefs included God ordaining sexual relations or sex being a relationship enhancer. Participants’ comments are supported by research on sexual sanctification and increased sexual satisfaction (Leonhardt et al., 2019). It was also important for religious individuals not to see sex as only procreational, and some participants had to process negative sexual messaging from their religious experience. Clinicians might seek to understand how religion informs a client’s purpose of sex through questions like, “What is the purpose of sex for you as an individual or couple?” or “Do you have any spiritual beliefs about sexuality that are important enough to you that you would like to share them with me?”

**Culture and Media**

The *Culture and Media* theme included reflections on perceived harmful cultural sexual messages presented through the dominant culture surrounding the religious subculture. Parents and children noted that being different (i.e., highly religious) was sometimes difficult. Because media often portrays values inconsistent with conservative and/or religious family values (Padilla-Walker et al., 2012), parents and children may establish connections, practices, and beliefs that provide a safe haven from “the world.” Asking clients to express how they deal with discrepant sexual messaging and whether their boundaries are sound and appropriate may be explored through questions like, “Are there important ways your sexual standards differ from secular culture and media?” or “How do you handle differences between what culture and media present and what you believe religiously?”
Concerns Regarding Children

This theme centered around parents’ beliefs and practices regarding children’s sexual socialization, including children’s dating practices, sexual boundaries, and dress standards. As other researchers have found, the obligation to provide and morally train children was prominent (Dollahite, Marks, Kear et al., 2018). However, religious parents generally teach children about sexuality less often and in more inhibited ways (Regnerus, 2016). This could be an important discussion point in a therapeutic setting, and one that might need to be initiated by the therapist. Questions such as, “How do you talk to your children about sex?” or “What are the most important religious truths you want your children know about their sexuality?” might help religious parents more openly explore this important topic with their children.

Clinical Implication Two: Recognize Religious Dualities

Our participants simultaneously noted both drawbacks and strengths in their sexual experiences, beliefs, and attitudes drawn from their religious participation. As Dollahite, Marks, and Dalton (2018) proposed in their work on religious dualities, religion has the potential to be both helpful and harmful in family life. Accordingly, a well-informed clinician will acknowledge both the potential problems and power religion might offer their clients.

It was clear in our sample that religious boundaries and rules regarding sex can be both positive and negative for individuals. For example, many of the women in our sample reportedly felt more power within the family but less power within institutionalized religious leadership. Women reported that sexual boundaries were a source of empowerment, such as women often being given charge of sexual relations; and yet this power to set rules may also work as a form of benevolent sexism (Haggard et al., 2019). This religious duality extended to the purposes of sexuality as well. Couples were generally comforted by this strict limitation of sexual expression within the boundary of marriage. However, a few noted that some religious teachings about
sexuality had a negative influence on sexual attitudes, including the limiting (and many believed erroneous) idea that sex is meant mainly for procreation. There was also evidence amongst our participants that religiosity can be tied to sexual shame (Murray et al., 2007). Clinicians might help clients explore both strengths and weaknesses in this complex area through questions such as, “Are there religious teachings that you feel inhibit your sexuality?” and “What religious ideals do you believe are positive for your sexual relationship?”

Several participants spontaneously discussed family planning. Some expressed the need to exercise sexual restraint as a positive force in a marriage, whereas others believed a departure from religious regulation was a better solution. As one participant stated, “I’ve never liked people telling me what I have to do.” Clinicians could ask questions that point to both positive and negative possibilities to grapple with religious dualities, such as, “What religious messaging have you received surrounding sexuality and procreation?” and “How might these religious messages strengthen or limit your sexual relationship?”

**Clinical Implication Three: Harnessing Religious Strengths**

The third clinical implication is to help clients harness religious strengths. Although in some cases religious faith might be a problem that needs to be addressed, there is also much to be gained by looking at strengths that religion might offer sexuality (Levand, 2021). Clients can benefit if clinicians look for potential strengths a religious worldview offers rather than defaulting to a problem-based perspective. Indeed, Post and Wade (2009) found religious individuals reported the strongest therapeutic alliance when they perceived that their therapist respected their religious beliefs.

Most participants believed their religion strengthened their sexual relationships, helping safeguard what was foundationally important to them. At times, these families’ values were
supported by religious doctrine and teachings, but for some, their tradition’s doctrine failed to capture the nuances of more progressive perspectives they held. When this tension occurred, the families in our study seemed to be able to wrestle with the inconsistencies and still maintain their foundations within their faith tradition. A clinical approach should allow clients to maintain the structure and deeply rooted values of religion while also offer the flexibility of evaluating more progressive perspectives. A respectful and inclusive approach avoids entirely or hastily rejecting beliefs systems that often anchor individual’s lives.

Respecting that religion might offer some clients a helpful and anchoring worldview is important, even vital (Post & Wade, 2009). How individuals interpret and enact their religion may be more important than what their religion teaches. Burr et al. (2012) noted, “It is what we do as a result of [our perceptions], ideals, and beliefs about the sacred that determines whether the sacred is helpful or harmful in families” (p. 17). Therapists can work to understand the core principles of an individual, couple, or family’s religious beliefs that are helpful and discuss ways to maintain their values even if some practical interpretations are adjusted in order to heal, grow, and strengthen sexual and familial relationships.

Limitations

Although participants discussed both strengths and weaknesses that their faith provided them in terms of sexuality in family life, most responses were positive in regards to how their faith enabled them to successfully navigate the intersection between religion and sex. This may have been due to the fact that these families were “exemplar” families. While studying exemplars plays an important role in qualitative research, it might have produced an oversampling of those who have navigated the intersection between religion and sexuality in successful ways. Important data would likely result from a similarly deep exploration with
families who have left religion. In addition, sexuality was not asked about explicitly in our interviews and mentions of sex were made spontaneously. Therefore, frequencies of codes in Table 2 should not be used to make relative judgments as to which themes are more common.

**Conclusion**

This study contributes to our understanding of the most salient themes surrounding sexuality for highly religious couples and families in the United States. We examined how religious belief may influence sexual attitudes, beliefs, and behavior. As sexual attitudes and beliefs of highly religious people are examined, practitioners may gain a richer and more textured understanding of the importance of religion and its influence on individual and couple sexual well-being. Clinicians can help clients through respectfully seeking to understand how their religious experiences and attitudes affect their sexuality and potentially help or harm their sexuality. An intentional focus on harnessing religious strengths can allow clients to set aside limiting attitudes or ideas while embracing the strength, power, and protection that their religion might offer their sexual relationship.
References


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### Table 2

*Frequency Counts of Themes Related to Sexuality*

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<th>Theme</th>
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<td>Purpose of Sex</td>
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<td>Culture and Media</td>
<td>49</td>
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<td>72</td>
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<td>Concerns Regarding Children</td>
<td>42</td>
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<sup>a</sup> Total interviews = 104 interviews which contained keywords related to sexual relationships and sexuality; the 104 interviews were drawn from the full sample of 198 interviews.
Chapter 4: Honoring Otherness: Religiosity and Marital Connection

Through Empathy and Commitment

This paper will be a multiple-authored work. Rebecca W. Clarke will be the first author, and will fully draft the manuscript. Dr. Chelom E. Leavitt will be the second author, and Dr. Jeremy B. Yorgason will be invited to be the third author. We will submit this paper to one of the following journals: *Journal of Marriage and Family, Family Relations, Journal of Family Psychology, Psychology of Religion and Spirituality, Mental Health, Religion & Culture, or Family Process.*
Abstract

Religiosity is generally associated with positive marital outcomes, but there is a notable lack of research on the mechanisms for that association. Martin Buber’s (1878–1965) I-Thou dialogic philosophy provides a framework from which we can examine how religion and positive marital outcomes might be related, specifically whether the constructs of commitment and empathy might mediate this relationship, and question whether this association is a concurrent and a longitudinal one. Using structural equation modeling and an actor-partner interdependence mediation model (APIMeM) with data from three time points, we examined direct and indirect effects of this association. Both commitment and empathy partially mediate the relationship between religiosity and marital connection as measured through relationship satisfaction and harmonious sexual passion, in a concurrent setting. However, these associations fade in a longitudinal model. The findings of this study suggest that individuals need to keep the Buberian principles of commitment and empathy flourishing, making a constant effort within their relationships to experience the benefits of honoring a partner’s otherness.

Keywords: religiosity, religion, commitment, empathy, Buber, marital connection
Honoring Otherness: Religiosity and Marital Connection

Through Empathy and Commitment

In a substantive body of social science research literature, religiosity has been modestly but consistently associated with positive marital outcomes, including marital stability, happiness, and quality (Brown et al., 2008; Clements et al., 2004; Day & Acock, 2013; Lambert & Dollahite, 2008; Mahoney, 2010; Perry, 2016). That well-established association has been tested using a wide variety of predictive factors, from virtues learned through religious teachings that improve marital relationships—such as humility, compassion, and positivity (Goddard et al., 2016)—to the unifying power of shared religious practices, such as couple prayer (Fincham et al., 2008; Lambert et al., 2012). In spite of such robust findings between religiosity and positive marital outcomes, there is a notable lack of coverage in the literature regarding how religion impacts relationship outcomes (Mahoney, 2010). Researchers have theorized there might be specific attitudes religious adherents develop through religious practice that play a possible role in this process (Galovan et al., 2021; Goddard et al., 2016). In addition, it is open to question whether these characteristics would have both longitudinal and concurrent effects. For example, researchers (Eyring et al., 2020) have found that forgiveness and gratitude are powerful personal characteristics that are associated with positive marital processes, but they are not long-lasting. That is, they need to be constantly renewed by couples in order to realize continued beneficial effects.

In considering associations between religiosity and marital outcomes, it is also important to acknowledge that the effects of religion on relationships are not unilaterally positive. Researchers have found that religion has the potential to divide as well as unite (Dollahite et al., 2018; Kelley et al., 2019), with more negative outcomes in dysfunctional families (Mahoney,
2010). Those ambivalent outcomes suggest there are still important questions to examine in terms of how religiosity functions in improving marital relationships, lessons to be learned as to how one’s faith might be successfully applied in those relationships (Kelley et al., 2019).

Martin Buber’s (1878–1965) dialogic philosophy provides a framework from which we can examine how religion and positive marital outcomes might be related, specifically through the constructs of commitment and empathy. Buber’s work focused on how individuals best connect with one another, which he asserted required seeing their partner as “a whole being” (Buber, 1970, p. 143), in ways that potentially overlap onto religious ideals. In Buber’s phenomenological-based philosophy asserts that relational connection matters (Galovan et al., 2021), and that the quality of that connection is deeply important. Therefore, this paper answers the call from Galovan and colleagues (2021) to understand what virtues in a Buberian “I-Thou” relationship are associated with positive relationship outcomes by examining the ways religiosity enhances marital connection through the indirect effects of commitment and empathy, and whether those effects are long-lasting or must be consistently renewed to be effective.

**Dialogic Philosophy**

Martin Buber’s dialogic, or “I-Thou,” philosophy of human relationships introduced a radical shift away from the individualism that was prevalent until the mid-twentieth century (Fishbane, 1998). Buber’s philosophy grew out of the phenomenological framework of examining the self. Buber’s similarly-minded contemporary, Emmanuel Levinas (1905-1995), also focused on the self; however, where Levinas positioned the self as subservient and responsible to “the other” in order to be fully human (Arnett, 2004), Buber emphasized the importance of interpersonal connection between two selves. Buber stated in almost metaphysical terms, “To be aware of a man . . . means in particular to perceive his wholeness as a person
determined by the spirit. . . . It is only possible when I step into an elemental relation with the other” (Buber, 1965, p. 80). Buber’s dialogical philosophy fundamentally altered the way some social scientists looked at human beings, their relationships, and especially how individuals best connect. He theorized that profound relational connection could only be achieved through honoring another’s fundamental otherness (Fishbane, 1998).

This irreducible self or otherness that Buber conceptualized took on religious subtones, in alignment with his scholarly work on Hasidic Judaism (Fife, 2015). Buber maintained that every human being holds within themselves the potential for goodness—even holiness (Fishbane, 1998). According to Buber, there are fundamentally two ways of being in relation with others. In the “I-It” formation, the other is viewed primarily as an object. The other is seen as a means to an end, as an object that may be capable of fulfilling desires, and if not, largely viewed as irrelevant (Fife, 2015). In contrast, the “I-Thou” formation is hallmarked by being present, authentic, and open (Friedman, 2002) to another human being.

What is important to Buber is not so much what happens in the minds of the individuals in a relationship, but what happens between the two of them in terms of understanding and responsibility (Arnett, 2004; Friedman, 2002). It is the quality of their connection that matters most. Can they open up a space for another to arise as a legitimate and whole being? Can they stay committed to honoring the reality of another? For the purposes of this study, I examine whether religion is associated with the quality of marital connection, through Buber’s I-Thou virtues of commitment and empathy (see Figure 1 for a conceptual model).

**Religion and Marital Connection**

In a marital relationship there is necessarily the presence of “the other” as a spouse and therefore a space for Buber’s constructs of connection to have an effect. In a religious marital
relationship, the presence of Deity sometimes manifests as a third marriage partner (Goodman & Dollahite, 2006; Lambert & Dollahite, 2008). Because of that dramatic complication, relational connection in religious marriages might differ in some fundamental ways from nonreligious ones. Fincham and colleagues (2007) found that religion might transform marriage through changing the meanings that partners bring to the relationship. For example, those who sanctified their marriage, believing their marriage had divine meaning, demonstrated improved marital intimacy, lower marital conflict, and longer marriage duration. That is, religion might promote specific meanings surrounding marriage that in turn improve marital quality. It is possible that religious experience might improve marital connection through promoting ideals that are associated with Buberian qualities of connecting with the other, specifically empathy and commitment. It is further possible that the effects of empathy and commitment are either long-lived and share a longitudinal association in addition to a concurrent association on marital quality, or that they are short-lived and must be renewed over time.

**Direct Effect and Outcomes**

**Religiosity**

There is evidence that religiosity contributes to improved marital and sexual connection, especially for those who view their relationships as sanctified by God (Mahoney et al., 2003). Although prior research has examined marital outcomes through the lens of Buber’s dialogic philosophy (see Goddard et al., 2016), the indirect effects of commitment and empathy between religiosity and marital connection have not been studied, and researchers (Galovan et al., 2021) have called for an examination of which I-Thou characteristics might be playing a role in marital connection.
Marital Connection: Relationship Satisfaction and Harmonious Sexual Passion

Marital connection is operationalized in this study as a positive marital outcome that encompasses both emotional and sexual elements. It is measured through relationship satisfaction (Funk & Rogge, 2007) and harmonious sexual passion (Busby et al., 2019). “Harmonious sexual passion” is a construct developed by Philippe and colleagues (2017), and defined as an adaptive approach to a sexual relationship where sexuality is integrated with one’s identity. Busby et al. (2019) found harmonious sexual passion the sexual-passion style most strongly associated with both positive sexual relationship outcomes and overall relationship outcomes. Although Buber was a philosopher—and so did not research exactly how individuals might efficaciously develop an “I-Thou” perspective or develop responsibility to the other—there are theoretical overlaps between religion and phenomenology that suggest the constructs of commitment and empathy might play important roles in honoring the Other that positively impact marital connection, as operationalized by harmonious sexual passion and relationship satisfaction.

Indirect Effects

Commitment

Researchers have suggested that commitment might have a spiritual dimension (Larson & Goltz, 1989) and that religiosity is associated with increased marital commitment (Hui et al., 2007; Lambert & Dollahite, 2008). In their study of 178 married couples, Larson and Goltz (1989) studied the impact of religion on marital commitment, and found that church attendance was a predictor of both personal commitment and commitment to social structures such as marriage. There appears to be a path between religiosity and commitment, and also commitment and relationship satisfaction. Fincham and colleagues (2007) found that a foundation of relational commitment can invite couples to transform their marriages toward marital gains and
away from relationship problems. Essentially, commitment allows members of the couple to develop an identity of “us with a future” (Fincham et al., 2007, p. 281) that ultimately improves relationship quality.

Buber affirmed that individuals could not reach their full human potential without being committed to entering into dialogue with others. Given the associations between religion and commitment, and commitment and marital connection, I theorize that commitment might be mediating between religion and harmonious sexual passion and relationship satisfaction. Taken together, harmonious sexual passion and relationship satisfaction are working to measure marital connection.

**Empathy**

Empathy is the ability to infer and understand another individual’s emotional state (Chung, 2014). Although there is a commonly held belief that religious people are disposed toward an empathic type of kindness, the association between religion and empathy appears to be mediated through how one approaches their religion (Duriez, 2004). For example, Duriez (2004) found with a group of Flemish university students that religiosity alone was not predictive of empathy, but those who approached their faith with the ability to think symbolically (i.e., better able to understand viewpoints beyond their own subjectivity, such as the perspective of another person) were more empathic.

Research has also tied empathizing with a spouse to positive marital processes (Chung, 2014). Buber wrote of the importance of “imagining the real” (Fishbane, 1998, p. 50) of a partner, while also retaining a sense of one’s self. In empathic interactions, blame is diminished and connection is improved, which can increase marital quality through empathic experiences such as “imagining the in between” (Fishbane, 1998, p. 50). The associations between religion,
empathy, and positive marital outcomes create room to theorize that empathy might be mediating between religiosity and marital connection.

**Hypotheses**

Based on Buber’s dialogic I-Thou philosophy and research that shows an association between religiosity, commitment, and empathy, and between commitment, empathy, and positive marital outcomes, the hypothesis (H) and research question (RQ) are as follows (see Fig. 1):

**H1:** Religiosity will be associated with higher levels of harmonious sexual passion and relationship satisfaction through commitment and empathy.

**RQ:** Will the association between religiosity, harmonious sexual passion, and relationship satisfaction, working through commitment and empathy, mediate both concurrently and longitudinally?

**Methods**

**Sample and Procedure**

The participants for this study were drawn from the Couple Relationships and Transition Experiences (CREATE) data collected at three time points (Waves II, III, and IV), approximately one year apart. CREATE is a nationally representative survey of newlywed couples, consisting of both heterosexual (total $N = 2,115$) and same-sex (total $N = 67$) dyadic marital relationships (total $N = 2,187$) at Wave I (see Yorgason et al., 2018). Participants were originally recruited from counties across the United States selected based on county population size, racial-ethnic distribution, and marriage, divorce, and poverty rates. Recruitment for Wave I closed in February of 2017 with a final sample of 2,187 marriages. Participants were asked to read and then acknowledge consent to participate in the study and given a $50.00 Visa gift card ($100 per couple) upon completion of the online survey at each wave. The study was approved by all

Beginning in April, 2017, Wave II data were obtained from 1,818 households, a retention rate of 83.5%. The Dillman survey method was used, with multiple contacts (text-message, email, U.S. mail, phone calls) made across time (Dillman et al., 2014). Of the 1,818 households, data from both members of the dyad were received in 1,699 (77%) cases, and data from one member of the dyad were received in the remaining 126 (7%) cases.

Summary statistics indicated the following descriptive information about the sample at Wave II. Partner 1 indicated the wife and Partner 2 indicated the husband, except in cases of same-sex couples (67 same-sex couples; 2,115 heterosexual couples; Partner 1 N = 2,113, Partner 2 N = 1,966). Because of the sample size and dyadic nature of the data, in this study I will utilize the terms *wives* and *husbands* instead of *Partner 1* and *Partner 2*. Men were on average 29.82 years old (SD = 5.64) and women 28.04 (SD = 5.38). The majority of the sample were in their first marriage (81%); however, some were in their second marriage or higher (19%). The majority of the couples reported being of European-American descent (65% wives, 59% husbands), with the remaining couples reported being of African American (8% wives, 10% husbands), Hispanic (13% wives, 11% husbands), Asian American (5% wives, 3% husbands), and Multiracial (5% wives, 8% husbands) descent. In terms of education, 43% of wives and 32% of husbands had a bachelor’s degree or higher. An additional 12% of wives and 10% of husbands reported that they were currently attending school. Approximately 15% of couples reported an annual income less than $29,999, 26% reported an annual income between $30,000–$59,999, 29% reported an annual income between $60,000–$99,999, and 25% reported an annual income greater than $100,000.
Measures

Religiosity

Religiosity was measured at Wave II, using a four-item construct taken from RELATE (Busby et al., 2001), and measured by asking participants to rate the importance of spirituality in their lives and how often they prayed or studied “sacred texts.” These results were coded on a five-point scale from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). Respondents were also asked to record the number of times in which they would attend religious services and those answers were coded on a five-point scale with 0 (weekly) to 4 (never). This response was reverse coded so that higher responses on all items indicated higher levels of religiosity. Scale reliability was adequate (Cronbach’s alpha wives = .90, husbands = .91).

Empathy

Empathy was measured using three items that asked what the respondent thought of themselves when it came to relationship behaviors such as listening and communication (Busby et al., 2001; Busby et al., 2010). Examples of the questions include, “I am able to listen to my partner in an understanding way,” and “In most matters, I understand what my partner is trying to say.” The responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). Empathy data in this study were utilized from Wave II (Cronbach’s alpha wives = .93, husbands = .91), and Wave III (Cronbach’s alpha wives = .92, husbands = .90).

Commitment

Commitment was measured using eight items from the Stanley and Markman (1992) commitment scale. Respondents were asked questions such as, “My relationship with my partner is more important to me than almost anything else in my life,” “I get satisfaction out of doing things for my partner, even if it means I miss out on something I want for myself,” and, “I want this relationship to stay strong.” These items were rated from 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly
disagree), with three of the items reverse coded so that higher scores indicated higher levels of commitment. Commitment data in this study were utilized from data collection at Wave II (Cronbach’s alpha wives = .83, husbands = .83), and Wave III (Cronbach’s alpha wives = .82, husbands = .82).

**Harmonious Sexual Passion**

The sexual passion scale has been adapted from work by Vallerand (2010) and Lalande et al. (2017). Harmonious sexual passion is characterized by a balanced and agreeable involvement between partners when it comes to their sexual relationship. Most importantly, harmonious sexual passion examines not only the satisfaction with one’s sexual relationship, but how one’s sexuality is incorporated into personal identity. Recently the sexual passion scales (which include inhibited and obsessive sexual passion) have been published with reliability and validity information in Busby et al. (2019). In this study, three items were used to create the harmonious sexual passion construct. Harmonious sexual passion data were utilized from Wave II, III, and IV. Questions were, “My strong sexual interests are well-integrated into my relationship with my partner,” “The sexual activities that I am excited about in my relationship with my partner are in harmony with other things that are a part of me,” and, “Excitement about sexual activities with my partner is balanced with the rest of my life.” Scale reliability was adequate at all waves for harmonious sexual passion data (Wave II Cronbach’s alpha wives = .91, husbands = .89; Wave III Cronbach’s alpha wives = .90, husbands = .90; and Wave IV Cronbach’s alpha wives = .93, husbands = .91).

**Relationship Satisfaction**

The relationship satisfaction construct was measured using four items from the Funk and Rogge (2007) relationship scale. Data for relationship satisfaction were utilized from Wave II, III, and IV. Respondents were asked to rate “how satisfied” they were in their relationship, “how
rewarding” their relationships were and whether or not they had a “warm and comfortable” relationship with their partner; these items were measured on a six-point scale from 0 (not at all) to 5 (completely). They were also asked to select their “degree of happiness” on a scale from 1 (extremely unhappy) to 7 (perfect). Scale reliability estimates were acceptable (Wave II Cronbach’s alpha wives = .95, husbands = .94; Wave III Cronbach’s alpha wives = .95, husbands = .93; and Wave IV Cronbach’s alpha wives = .95, husbands = .95).

**Control Variables**

Control variables included in this study were age, race, and education level. Gender was accounted for through the Partner 1 (wives in heterosexual relationships) and Partner 2 (husbands in heterosexual relationships) group membership. On the survey participants entered their current age in years. Race was assessed through the following groups: “African (Black),” “Asian,” “Caucasian (White),” “Native American,” “Latino (Mexican American, Puerto Rican, Cuban, etc.),” or “Other.” Education was assessed through participants’ answering their highest level of education completed, from 1 “less than high school” to 7 “Advanced degree (JD, PhD, PsyD, etc.).”

**Analysis Plan**

Structural equation modeling was utilized to estimate the models. Path analyses were estimated between religiosity and relationship satisfaction and harmonious sexual passion, via commitment and empathy. Direct and indirect effects were analyzed between the predictor (religiosity) and the outcome variables of harmonious sexual passion and relationship satisfaction, via the mediators of commitment and empathy (see Figure 1 for conceptual model; see Figure 2 for path analysis model). Preliminary analyses, including bivariate correlations and mean difference tests, were conducted in Stata (Version 16; StataCorp., 2019). For the structural equation portions of the model, I used Mplus (Version 8; Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2017). I
tested concurrent mediation (all predictors and outcomes at time 1 [T1]; see Figure 2). The actor-partner interdependence mediation model (APIMeM) was used to account for the dyadic nature of the data (Ledermann et al., 2011; see Figure 1). Partner residuals were correlated because the data were non-independent (Kenny et al., 2006). Full information maximum likelihood was used to estimate missing data, and all results were standardized.

The bootstrap approach was employed because it is considered an appropriate method when examining indirect effects (Hayes, 2013; Hayes et al., 2011). For this study, 5,000 bootstrap samples were drawn to examine the indirect effects of religiosity through commitment and empathy on relationship satisfaction and harmonious sexual passion. The bootstrap method adjusts standard errors of the indirect effects so they are not artificially low, which can lead to a Type I error (Kline, 2015).

For the longitudinal model, I tested longitudinal mediation of the independent variable at time 1 (T1), the mediators at time 2 (T2), and outcomes at time 3 (T3) in order to test whether the effects were causal or held up over time. This is called a “dynamic mediation model” by Cain et al. (2018), and can help expose bias in the concurrent mediation model (see Figure 3).

**Results**

Descriptive statistics for all variables are reported in Table 1. Bivariate correlations between model variables for wives and husbands, as well as the correlations between wives and husbands are presented in Table 2. Mean comparison of all variables revealed a handful of significant differences between partners. Wives were significantly higher on religiosity than husbands (wives $M = 3.31$, husbands $M = 2.64$; $t(1672) = 11.79, p < .001$). Wives were also significantly higher than husbands on the measure of empathy (wives $M = 3.98$, husbands $M = 3.88$; $t(1512) = 4.71, p < .001$). Husbands were significantly higher than wives on harmonious
sexual passion at T2 (wives $M = 3.25$, husbands $M = 3.32$; $t(1480) = -2.64, p < .01$; see Table 1 for full results).

Model fit statistics for the structural model (see Figures 2 and 3) yielded a chi-square coefficient of 513.215, $p < .001$, ($df = 81$), with the following fit indices: $CFI = 0.970$, $RMSEA = 0.049$, and $SRMR = 0.052$. Based on fit index standards, these results indicated that the model was a very good fit for the data based on the following recommendations: $CFI$ values above 0.90, $RMSEA$ value below 0.05, $SRMR$ value below 0.08 (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Covariates

In terms of the relationships between covariates and the endogenous variables (relationship satisfaction and harmonious sexual passion) in the longitudinal model, increased education for husbands was associated with their own relationship satisfaction at T1 and T2 ($\beta = .06, p < .05$ and $\beta = .06, p < .01$), with no such association for wives. Husbands’ education was also associated with wives’ relationship satisfaction at T2 ($\beta = .06, p < .01$). Being African American was negatively associated for husbands with their own relationship satisfaction at T1 and T2 ($\beta = -.07, p < .05$ and $\beta = -.07, p < .05$). Black wives trended in this same direction; however, although this negative association reached the level of statistical significance at T1 ($\beta = -.07, p < .05$), it did not retain statistical significance at T2. Latina wives also had a negative association with relationship satisfaction at T2 ($\beta = -.05, p < .05$).

Wives’ education was significantly negatively associated with harmonious sexual passion at T1 ($\beta = -.08, p < .01$), and although trended negatively across time, the association was not significant at later time points. Black and Latino husbands had a positive association with harmonious sexual passion at T3 ($\beta = .09, p < .05$ and $\beta = .05, p < .05$), as did Latina wives at T1 ($\beta = .08, p < .01$). For wives, age was negatively associated with harmonious sexual passion at T1 and T2 ($\beta = -.10, p < .01$ and $\beta = -.07, p < .05$), whereas for husbands, the trend with age and
harmonious passion was positive—although it did not reach the level of statistical significance. None of the other control variables were significantly related to husbands’ and wives’ relationship satisfaction and harmonious sexual passion.

In terms of the relationships between covariates and the mediator variables (empathy and commitment), education was significantly positively related for husbands to commitment at T1 and T2 ($\beta = .06, p < .05$ and $\beta = .09, p < .01$) and empathy at T1 and T2 ($\beta = .09, p < .01$ and $\beta = .10, p < .01$). Wives’ age was negatively predictive of empathy at T2 ($\beta = -.06, p < .05$) and of commitment at T1 ($\beta = -.07, p < .05$).

**Path Analysis and Concurrent Mediation**

The hypothesis—that religiosity will be associated with higher levels of individual and spousal marital connection through commitment and empathy—was largely supported. There were several significant paths in the regression model (where all predictors, covariates, mediators, and outcomes were measured at T1) that are worth noting (see Figure 2). Religiosity was significantly associated with commitment and empathy for both husbands (com. $\beta = .14$, emp. $p < .001$; $\beta = .17, p < .001$) and wives (com. $\beta = .19$, emp. $p < .001$; $\beta = .12, p < .01$). Religiosity was associated with husbands’ own harmonious sexual passion ($\beta = .09, p < .05$) and wives’ own harmonious sexual passion ($\beta = .05, p < .01$), but no associations directly between religiosity and the outcome of relationship satisfaction were noted.

The outcome of harmonious sexual passion was significantly associated with empathy for both partners (wives $\beta = .24, p < .001$; husbands $\beta = .23, p < .001$), as were empathy and relationship satisfaction (wives $\beta = .24, p < .001$; husbands $\beta = .23, p < .001$). Commitment and empathy were both positively associated with relationship satisfaction and sexual harmonious passion for wives. For husbands, empathy was associated with both relationship satisfaction and
harmonious sexual passion, whereas commitment was associated with relationship satisfaction but not harmonious sexual passion. (Full actor-partner effects can be found in Figure 2.)

The concurrent mediation model, where the predictor, covariates, mediators, and outcomes were all estimated at T1 (see Table 3), revealed several patterns in wives’ and husbands’ relationship satisfaction. There was a significant indirect effect with wives’ religiosity and wives’ empathy as the mediator, and both wives’ and husbands’ relationship satisfaction (wives’ rel. sat. $\beta = .05, p < .01$; husbands’ rel. sat. $\beta = .03, p < .01$). There was a negative indirect effect of wives’ religiosity on both wives’ and husbands’ relationship satisfaction through husbands’ empathy (wives’ rel. sat. $\beta = -.04, p < .01$; husbands’ rel. sat. $\beta = -.06, p < .01$). The negative regression between wives’ religiosity and husband’s empathy ($\beta = -14, p < .01$) accounted for this negative association. The indirect effect of a husband’s religiosity via husbands’ empathy to both wife and husband relationship satisfaction indicated both actor and actor-partner effects. There was associated with husband religiosity a significant positive effect (wives’ rel. sat. $\beta = .05, p < .001$; husbands’ rel. sat. $\beta = .08, p < .001$). The indirect effect of a wife’s religiosity via her own commitment was associated with higher relationship satisfaction for herself, but not for her husband’s (wives’ rel. sat. $\beta = .03$). The indirect effect of a husband’s religiosity via husbands’ commitment was significant for both wives’ and husbands’ relationship satisfaction (wives’ rel. sat. $\beta = .01, p < .05$; husbands’ rel. sat. $\beta = .03, p < .01$), again revealing an actor-partner effect. There was a significant total indirect effect and direct effect for husbands’ religiosity, and it had an effect on husband’s relationship satisfaction indirectly through husbands’ empathy and husbands’ commitment (total indirect effect $\beta = .09, p < .01$; total effect $\beta = .13, p < .001$). These mediation results were replicated and found to be similar at T2.
There were several mediational paths between religiosity and harmonious sexual passion that were also significant (see Table 3). There was a significant indirect effect, with wives’ religiosity and wives’ empathy as the mediator, on wives’ and husbands’ sexual satisfaction (wives’ harmony = .03, p < .01; husbands’ harmony β = .02, p < .05). There was a negative indirect effect of wives’ religiosity on both her and her husband’s harmonious sexual passion through husbands’ empathy (wives’ harmony β = -.02, p < .01; husbands’ harmony β = -.03, p < .01). The negative regression coefficient between wives’ religiosity and husband’s empathy (β = -.14, p < .01) accounted for this negative association. The indirect effect of a husband’s religiosity via husbands’ empathy to both wives’ and husbands’ harmonious sexual passion was associated with a significant positive effect (wives’ harmony β = .03, p < .001; husbands’ harmony, β = .04, p < .001), indicating an actor-partner effect. The indirect effect of husbands’ religiosity via husbands’ own commitment was associated with higher harmonious sexual passion for husbands (β = .01, p < .05), but not for wives. There was a significant total indirect effect and direct effect for husbands’ religiosity on husbands’ harmonious sexual passion through husbands’ empathy and husbands’ commitment (total indirect effect β = .04, p < .01; direct effect β = .08, p < .05). These concurrent mediation results were replicated and found to be similar at T2.

**Dynamic Longitudinal Mediation at Three Time Points**

Regarding the research question (whether religiosity would be associated with marital connection and relationship satisfaction and harmonious sexual passion, through commitment and empathy, concurrently and longitudinally), the path analysis yielded meager results (see Figure 3). The path analysis revealed that the associations between religiosity, empathy, and commitment found in T1 dropped off at T2, with the exception of husbands’ religiosity on commitment (β = .09, p < .05). There were no significant actor-partner effects from either
husbands or wives over the three time points (see Table 3 for wives’ standardized effects and Table 4 for husbands’ standardized effects). However, husbands’ religiosity at T1 did positively and directly predict their own harmonious sexual passion at T3 ($\beta = .09, p < .01$). There were also significant associations between wives’ empathy at T2 and their own harmonious sexual passion at T3 ($\beta = .07, p < .05$).

There were also no full mediation paths to indicate this relationship held up over time, with the exception of a significant direct effect between a husband’s religiosity and harmonious sexual passion (direct effect $\beta = .092, p < .01$; see Table 4). Husbands’ religiosity at T1 was also associated with husbands’ commitment at T2 ($\beta = .90, p < .05$) and wives’ empathy at T2 was associated with her own harmonious sexual passion at T3 ($\beta = .07, p < .05$; see Figure 3).

**Discussion**

This study provides evidence that specific Buberian I-Thou relationship virtues, namely commitment and empathy (Galovan et al., 2021), might be two ways that religiosity and marital connection are linked. Indeed, highly religious individuals who see their marriages and sexual relationships as sacred, or sanctified, appear to experience higher sexual and relational satisfaction (Leavitt et al., 2021). This study’s findings were also in keeping with Buber’s ideas about connection, which were born in philosophy and religion and later informed by social science. Buber theorized that only when individuals relate to each other in an “I-Thou” manner and perceive the other as legitimate and whole, could profound relational connection be achieved (Fishbane, 1998). In this study, religiosity appears to inhabit this connective space as well to be positively associated with marital connection through commitment and empathy. Although almost all mediation effects disappeared when the model examined associations over time, there were significant pathways and direct and indirect effects when religiosity, commitment and
empathy, and marital connection (relationship satisfaction and harmonious sexual passion) were measured concurrently (both at T1 and T2).

Empathy appears to be an important construct for both wives’ and husbands’ relationship satisfaction as well as their experience of harmonious sexual passion. In the context of religiosity, when both wives and husbands were more empathetic, they experienced greater relationship satisfaction in their marriages. This actor effect is supported by prior research (Chung, 2014) that found empathy to be associated with positive marital outcomes and processes. The capacity to take the other’s perspective is vitally important for both the sexual and romantic relationship, and as Buber’s dialogic philosophy proposes, such a capacity is realized when individuals view others as legitimate and whole human beings. The “I-Thou” formation is the ability to be present and open (Friedman, 2002) to the reality of another human being; in the I-Thou formation individuals are better able to make space for another human being be as a full and legitimate self (Fife, 2015). The connective power of empathy was also noted in the outcome of harmonious sexual passion as well. In the context of religiosity, more harmonious sexual passion was expressed by both husbands and wives who reported higher levels of empathy.

Commitment followed a similar, positive pattern that paralleled that of empathy. Husbands and wives who, in the context of religiosity, demonstrated greater commitment, also reported higher harmonious sexual passion for both partners on the actor level. Religiosity has been associated with commitment in previous work (Hui et al., 2007; Lambert & Dollahite, 2008; Larson & Goltz, 1989), and commitment has been associated with improved marital outcomes (Fincham et al., 2007). This study, too, found commitment was associated with religiosity and marital connection.
The partner effects were somewhat less clear. Wives’ religiosity appeared to be negatively associated with husbands’ empathy, which had the effect of dampening both wives’ and husbands’ relationship satisfaction as well as harmonious sexual passion. These varying outcomes between religiosity and marital outcomes through empathy are not necessarily at odds with prior research, but do perhaps suggest a difference in the underlying construct or measurement of it. For example, Duriez (2004) found that empathy was not always positively associated with religiosity, but rather how an individual approached their religiosity mediated their empathy. When the actor-partner pathway was examined, the relationship became negative for wives’ religiosity on husbands’ empathy. It is possible that although wives and husbands approve of their own approach to religiosity—there is an actor effect between religiosity and empathy—the connection between religiosity and empathy is disrupted when spouses approach religiosity in ways that differ markedly from each other.

The only enduring direct effect when time was introduced into the model was for husbands’ religiosity and an increase in harmonious sexual passion over time. Because harmonious sexual passion is a relatively new area of research (Busby et al., 2019; Philippe et al., 2017), this finding is especially intriguing. Future research might focus on this association between religiosity and harmonious sexual passion for husbands. I was expecting a clearer mediated and direct connection between religiosity and relationship satisfaction, given that prior research suggests that positive marital outcomes are often associated with religiosity (Clements et al., 2004; Day & Acock, 2013; Lambert & Dollahite, 2008; Mahoney, 2010; Perry, 2016) and I had questioned whether or not this effect would hold up over time. However, there was no direct association between religiosity and relationship satisfaction in the path analysis, the concurrent mediation model, or the dynamic mediation model. It is possible that the Relationship
Satisfaction scale (Funk & Rogge, 2007) picked up primarily on hedonic elements of satisfaction, and that a scale focusing more on eudaimonic (human flourishing) dimensions of the relationship (e.g., Relationship Flourishing Scale; Fowers et al., 2016) might capture qualities of marital connection that are more closely tied to religiosity, such as personal growth, relational giving, and goal sharing. Examining this question is a valuable direction for future research.

Perhaps one of the most important findings in regards to commitment and empathy in this study is the fact that when adding time to the model (all variables were measured at one-year intervals, and measured three times) almost all of the connections between religiosity, commitment, empathy, and marital connection outcomes in the path analysis and concurrent APIEEM model became meager to non-existent. It is possible that the measurement occasions were not optimal (see Cain et al., 2018). The data were collected at 1-year intervals, and perhaps the effects of commitment and empathy do not oscillate much over time (and therefore, commitment and empathy are not likely to increase by enough to create any increase in marital outcomes that are measured over time). However, it is also possible that the powerful connective effects of commitment and empathy are short-lived. Because these characteristics do seem to play a positive role in improving relationship satisfaction and increasing harmonious sexual passion, perhaps empathy and commitment are characteristics, like forgiveness and gratitude (Eyring et al., 2020), that are powerful but ephemeral.

Implications

For couples hoping to improve marital connection—as well as those who work with them—perhaps one of the most meaningful findings in this study was that the positive effects of commitment and empathy are short-lived. These characteristics play a positive role in improving relationship satisfaction and increasing harmonious sexual passion, but their effects are not long-
lasting. Rather than assuming their ephemerality makes them unimportant, clinicians and couples might instead recognize that it is critical to keep these positive characteristics ever-present in relationships in order for them to be beneficial. One way to conceptualize this is to compare it to a nutritional diet based on fresh produce. We cannot eat an apple one day and then expect to feel its salutatory effects a year later. But building a habit of fresh produce daily can improve our health. Similarly, perhaps empathy and commitment are characteristics, like forgiveness and gratitude (Eyring et al., 2020), that are useful in improving marital connection but must be cultivated consistently. This study indicates that commitment and empathy require constant effort and need to be continually renewed in a relationship in order to create the honoring of the other that Buber claimed was so vital to relationships and that positively impacts marital connection.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

This study had several strengths, including the nationally representative, longitudinal, dyadic survey sample. However, the sample was largely comprised of newly married, cisgender heterosexual couples in their 20s and 30s and is, therefore, not generalizable to groups outside of this population. Future research could examine religiosity and marital outcomes in other important groups such as mid- and late-life and LGTBQ+ couples. In addition, couples whose marriages endure might provide valuable insight regarding the power of commitment and empathy in terms of creating connection. Although commitment and empathy are important elements to consider, there are of course a myriad of other characteristics and attributes that might grow out of a religious experience and be beneficial to marriages. Because almost all associations and effects were diminished or disappeared entirely in the dynamic longitudinal model, it is possible that adding time revealed bias in the concurrent model (Cain et al., 2018).
Researchers (e.g., Kenny, 1975) have noted that time between measurements is often chosen for convenience rather than sound theoretical considerations, because theory rarely specifies the optimal measurement lag, and this is possibly the case in this study.

**Conclusion**

Martin Buber’s dialogic I-Thou philosophy provides a framework through which we can examine the associations between religiosity and marital connection. Buber asserted that the most important work we do as human beings is in relation to one another. How we connect is based on our fundamental way of relating, whether that is through an I-It perspective, where we view others as objects to be used and manipulated, or an I-Thou perspective, where we view others as legitimate and whole human beings. Religion also encourages quality of connection, and can enhance marriages by imparting meanings that surround as well as permeate the marital relationship. In keeping with the theoretical overlap between Buber’s dialogic philosophy and religion, it appears that features of both commitment and empathy partially mediate the relationship between religiosity and marital connection, as measured through relationship satisfaction and harmonious sexual passion, in a concurrent setting. However, these associations fall away in a longitudinal model. The findings of this study suggest that individuals need to keep the Buberian principles of commitment and empathy ever-present and make a constant effort within their relationships to experience the benefits of honoring a partner’s otherness.
References


StataCorp. (2019). *Stata statistical software: Release 16*. In StataCorp, LP.


Table 1

Means, SDs, Ranges, and Mean Differences for Observed Variables

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
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Note. T1 (time 1) is Wave II, T2 is Wave III, and T3 is Wave IV. Husbands and wives correspond to heterosexual couples only (N = 2,115; same-sex couples N = 67).

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.
Table 2

**Bivariate Correlations Between Model Variables for Wives and Husbands**

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*Note.* Correlations on the bottom of the diagonal correspond to Partner 1 (the wife, in heterosexual marriages), above the diagonal is for Partner 2 (the husband, in heterosexual marriages; \(N = 2,115\); same-sex couples \(N = 67\)). T1 = Wave II, T2 = Wave III, and T3 = Wave IV. Along the diagonal is the standardized correlation coefficient between husbands and wives.

* \(p < .05\), ** \(p < .01\), *** \(p < .001\).
### Table 3

*Standardized Dyadic Indirect, Direct, and Total Effects of Religiosity on Relationship Satisfaction and Harmonious Sexual Passion as Mediated by Empathy and Commitment for Wives and Husbands, All Measured at Time 1*

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* * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.
Table 4

*Standardized Dyadic Indirect, Direct, and Total Effects of Religiosity at Time 1 on Relationship Satisfaction and Harmonious Sexual Passion at Time 3 as Mediated by Empathy and Commitment at Time 2 for Wives and Husbands*

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<td>Wife’s Religiosity</td>
<td>Husband’s Religiosity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indirect effect via</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Total indirect effect</td>
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<td>-.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct effect</td>
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<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total effect</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.01</td>
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<th>Wife’s Harmonious Sexual Passion</th>
<th>Husband’s Harmonious Sexual Passion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wife’s Religiosity</td>
<td>Husband’s Religiosity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect effect via</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Wife’s Empathy</td>
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<td>Husband’s Empathy</td>
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<td>Wife’s Commitment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Husband’s Commitment</td>
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<td>-.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total indirect effect</td>
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<td>-.00</td>
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<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total effect</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.03</td>
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</table>

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.
Figure 1

Actor-Partner Interdependence Mediation Model, or APIMeM, for Religiosity on Relationship Satisfaction and Harmonious Sexual Passion, Through Commitment and Empathy

Note. All actor-actor regression paths were estimated, and are shown with a solid line. Actor-partner paths were also estimated, and are shown with a dashed line. Heterosexual marriages $N = 2,115$; same-sex couples $N = 67$.

This APIMeM model is based on the work of Ledermann, Macho, and Kenny (2011). This model was measured both concurrently and, in the terminology of Cain et al. (2018), dynamically (where predictors, covariates, mediators, and outcomes were estimated at T1, mediators and outcomes at T1 and T2, and outcomes at T3).
Figure 2

*Path Analysis Regressions Between Religiosity on Relationship Satisfaction and Harmonious Sexual Passion, Through Commitment and Empathy, All Measured at Time 1*

**Note.** Coefficients are standardized. Model fit statistics: $\chi^2 = 513.215, p < .001, (df = 81)$, CFI = 0.970, RMSEA = 0.049, SRMR = 0.052.

All actor-actor regression paths were estimated, and are shown with a solid line. Actor-partner paths were also estimated, and are shown with a dashed line. Heterosexual couples $N = 2,115$; same-sex couples $N = 67$. Only significant paths are shown in the model.

Covariates in the model that are not shown for simplicity are age, race, education for P1 and P2; likewise, P1 and P2 variables are correlated but those correlations are left out of the model for parsimony. (Based on Ledermann et al., 2011.)

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$
Figure 3

Dynamic Mediation: Longitudinal Associations Between Religiosity on Relationship Satisfaction and Harmonious Sexual Passion, Through Commitment and Empathy, at Times 1, 2, and 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time 1</th>
<th>Time 2</th>
<th>Time 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religiosity Wife</td>
<td>Relationship Satisfaction Wife</td>
<td>( R^2 = .33 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( R^2 = .32 )</td>
<td>Empathy Wife</td>
<td>Harmonious Sexual Passion Wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment Wife</td>
<td>( R^2 = .17 )</td>
<td>( R^2 = .38 )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment Husband</td>
<td>( R^2 = .18 )</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harmonious Sexual Passion Husband</td>
<td>( R^2 = .38 )</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Coefficients are standardized. Model fit statistics: \( \chi^2 = 84.233, p < .01, (df = 56) \), CFI = 0.97, TLI = 0.98, RMSEA = 0.015, SRMR = 0.008.

All covariates, dependent variables, mediators, and outcome variables were included in the model at T1, all mediators and outcomes were included at T2, and outcomes were included at T3. Although these were included in the analysis they were not shown for simplicity. Covariates in the model that are not shown are age, race, and education for wives and husbands. Likewise, dyadic wife and husband variables are correlated in the model, but not shown for simplicity.

All actor-actor regression paths were estimated, and significant paths are shown with a solid line. Actor-partner paths were also estimated, and significant paths are shown with a dashed line. Heterosexual marriages \( N = 2,115 \); same-sex couples \( N = 67 \). (Based on Cain et al., 2018.)

* \( p < .05 \), ** \( p < .01 \), *** \( p < .001 \)
Chapter 5: Final Discussion

This dissertation adds to previous research that has associated religion with many areas of human flourishing (VanderWeele, 2017). Specifically, in this dissertation I found that religion can help individuals enjoy improved marital connection and transcendent, meaningful, and nourishing sexual experiences. There are at least four implications that grow out of this research.

**Implication One: The Importance of Connection**

Healthy expressions of religion offer humans a roadmap for connection. This dissertation is titled “God, Me, and Thee,” based on the idea that all religions to some degree aim to help people to connect to the divine, to their better self, and to important others in their lives. Some of the questions in this dissertation examined the divine-human connection through assessing religiosity, and others attempted to capture a sense of human-human connection. It appears that religion has much to do with connection, and connection has very much to do with individual and relational well-being (Pinel et al., 2020). In fact, connection is so important that researchers have recently begun to examine marriage in terms of connection instead of happiness in order to more fully capture relational meanings and outcomes (Galovan et al., 2021).

Religion and marriage share an important commonality in that they both engage in the work of connection. Future research might explore more fully how this relatively new concept of marital connection is associated with religion, with a focus on which mechanisms might be driving this association.

**Implication Two: Religion Impacts Sexuality in (Mostly) Positive Ways**

In social science research, there is a generally positive association between religion and marital sex. This is different from the conventional assumption that religion is bad for sex (although it does appear to be negative for those who are living discrepantly from their religious
sexual beliefs; Hardy & Willoughby, 2017), and understanding this affects many. Although there has been a fairly dramatic shift away from formal religious worship in recent years (Pew, 2019), religion still matters to many U.S. adults: 53% ranked religion as very important to them (Pew, 2014). Sexuality also matters to most U.S. adults, with 70% ranking a happy sexual relationship as very important to making a marriage work (Pew, 2007). In summary, most people are religious, and most people care about creating healthy sexual relationships.

This dissertation suggests that there are at least three ways religion might help improve sexual quality: 1) improving divine and human connection through sexual sanctification, 2) teaching virtues such as commitment and empathy, and 3) living in accordance with religious sexual boundaries. The spontaneous utterances about sex from highly religious families in the qualitative study indicate that religious people care deeply about how they integrate sexuality into a religious framework of meaning. It would be of especial interest to me to further explore these issues with members of my own faith (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints). Specifically, I would like to see how, where, and when my Church cohort receives religious sexual teachings, and how those teachings impact their sexuality.

**Implication Three: The “Good News” for Marital Sex**

One of the main ways that religion appears to bless sexuality is through sexual sanctification (Hernandez et al., 2013). The more that religious (and even non-religious) individuals can conceptualize God as approving of their sexual relationship and they can see their marital sexual relationship as a place of learning and growth, the better the marital sexual connection. We often expect that marriage will settle into comfortable complacency. However, like dynamic and growing individuals, this does not need to be the case. Marriage can get more interesting. Marriage can get better. Social science scholars explain the positive outcomes this
way: “a sanctified sexual experience can be a conduit for transcendence, bliss, peace, and even healing for committed couples” (Leonhardt et al., 2019, p. 8). Anything made sacred can be taken “beyond the mark” into a realm of rigid zealously. But couples who approach a sexual relationship with a growth mindset toward learning how to love one another better will tend to enjoy more connective sex.

The conceptual piece (chapter 2) and the qualitative study (chapter 3) in this dissertation point out that religious individuals might need assistance in how best to tune into their erotic energy so that it feels like a God-given blessing. As religious couples conceptualize their marital sexual relationship as a way to learn to harness and utilize their sexuality, this can help them work through the obstacles that Dr. Schnarch proposes are inevitable to—and indeed the purpose of—any sexual relationship (cited in Shealy, n.d.). The good news of the gospel is that we can learn and grow and improve, and this potential includes positive growth in a marital sexual relationship. Marital relationships can become more rewarding over time. Marriage can become better.

**Implication Four: A Personal Journey and Holy Envy**

When I earned my master’s degree in Marriage and Family Therapy over twenty years ago, I wrote for my thesis a decade review of the research on adult female survivors of childhood sexual abuse. I looked specifically at what therapeutic approaches were available and most effective for this population. One of my hypotheses was that marriage would play an important role in healing and helping to create a satisfying sexual relationship. But not a single study from 1990–2000 that I reviewed on therapy for female trauma survivors examined the question of a marital sexual relationship, or even took into account the commitment level of the survivors’ current sexual relationships. Most treatments at the time were individual therapeutic case studies,
and based on sensate focus exercises, which, although potentially effective in reducing anxiety during sex, overemphasize individualistic dimensions of sex. Research suggests that the best, most transcendent sex is relational (Kleinplatz et al., 2009; Kontula & Miettinen, 2016), and relationality was nowhere to be found in the research. Whether marriage might play an important role in sexual satisfaction remains, even two decades later, a largely unanswered question (Francis et al., 2019; McFarland et al., 2011).

I am persuaded the quality of marriage matters pivotally to the sexual relationship, and especially for those who are religious—for at least two reasons. First, because both sex and religion are focused on finding and creating connection, religious values and experiences are helpful in guiding individuals into more connective spaces (Pinel et al., 2020). Second, because most religions maintain marriage to be the divinely appointed scenario for developing a sexual relationship (Buss, 2002), living outside a chosen moral boundary might negatively impact the meanings and experience of sex, precluding one from experiencing sex-positive advantages available in religion. The studies I have conducted suggest this is the case.

Finally, as an invested member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints I have enjoyed learning more about how other religions benefit and benefit from marriage and marital sex. Writing this dissertation, studying other faiths, I have experienced my fair share of what Krister Stendahl, a former dean of the Harvard Divinity School, termed “holy envy,” like other scholars suggested I might (Marks & Dollahite, 2018, p. 765). I have come to admire Jewish women’s power in their sexual relationships, as well as the Jewish perspective on the significance of sex. Specifically, that “the act of lovemaking was considered as holy as the act of entering into the inmost chamber of the temple” (Sellers, 2017. p. 69). I yearn to exercise the depth of devotion and dedication that Muslims exhibit to family and to God (Marks & Dollahite,
2018). I have felt an expanded sense of appreciation for the clarity and positivity of Catholic thought regarding the marital sexual relationship, including the pervasive view of personalist concerns in Catholic thought that invite its members into considering how love and responsibility work together (Wojtyla, 1993). Particularly powerful to me was this Catholic perspective on marital sex: “The unitive aspect of marriage involves the full personhood of the spouses, a love that encompasses the minds, hearts, emotions, bodies, souls, and aspirations of husband and wife. They are called to grow continually in unitive love” (USCCB, 2006, p. 408).

Part of my aim in undertaking this project was to understand what religiosity contributes to sex in terms of how spouses might learn to love one another better. It is a sweet irony that I have learned to love other religions better in the process. Ultimately, I have learned that religion can bless marital sexuality, making it more connective, transcendent, and meaningful. It has been a soul-satisfying pleasure to consider the associations between religion, sexuality, and marital sexual connection and the power available to a couple when the relationship includes “God, Me, and Thee.”
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