The Effects of Religious Beliefs in Marriage and Family

By Loren Marks

Marriage and family are sacred and central to most world religions. Even so, until recently many social scientists have regarded religious faith as a relatively minor factor in individual and family development. Minimizing religion is considered justifiable because although 95 percent of all married couples and parents in America report a religious affiliation, for many, religious faith consists of little more than a nominal affiliation or occasional obligatory attendance at a certain church. For many persons, however, faith profoundly influences both personal and family life.
One Christian father offers his personal feelings about his religious beliefs.

Either you believe this stuff or you don’t, and if you do and if you have a faith that is meaningful and alive...then [religious faith] is the most important thing that exists. If it’s not true, it’s the most important lie that exists. I am basing my life and my future and eternity on the fact that this is true.

This father’s assertion that religious faith is “the most important thing that exists” for him illustrates why clergy, professional helpers, scholars, and all informed people should be aware of the expressions, influences, and meanings ascribed to faith by the highly religious. In response to this need, I studied highly religious parents from three major world religions: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Below I share some of my findings.

**the individual-to-God relationship**

In order to understand the meanings and influences of religious practices at the family level, it is first necessary to convey the importance of the individual-to-God relationship. Joshua, a Jewish father of two, uses the words “connect,” “connecting,” and “connection” five times to describe his personal relationship with his God.

*I think there’s three kinds of prayer; public prayer, private prayer, and family prayer... In each case, you are trying to connect with God, which is very important. For people who believe in God, we all want to connect with God...and sometimes you are more successful connecting than other times... Occasionally, I’ll have that extra special feeling that sometimes accompanies prayer... Most of the time when I’m praying, I don’t feel like I’m really connecting but the intent of going through the prayer is not just to say the words, it’s to make that connection.*

Although Joshua notes three different kinds of prayer (public, private, and family) his “intent” is the same regardless of the type of prayer; to connect on a personal, emotional level with the divine. Joshua’s insight relates closely with that of Omar, an Arab-American Muslim and the father of two.

*Prayer in Arabic is called salat. What does salat mean? It means connection, it is your time to connect with God.*

Jessica, a Christian mother of four, offers a third example of the importance of a personal connection and sense of relationship with God.

*I think that time spent with the Lord is essential. Personal time. We meet every week in meetings... and learn scripture and things, but I think it all comes down to our personal relationship with Jesus and that has to come on an individual basis. Just like any other friendship, if you want to get to know someone you need to spend time, you need to focus on him or her, and listen to them and talk to them and let them into your heart. It’s the same thing with God; we could go to church every day of the week, but if we didn’t make time when we just get face-to-face with God alone, I don’t think our relationship with Him would grow.*

Jessica’s tone, like that of Joshua and Omar, is very personal and focused on a private connection with God. Note her phrases, “personal time [with the Lord],” “personal relationship with Jesus,” “friendship,” and “face-to-face with God alone.” Although Jessica is highly involved in her faith community and has served as a youth group leader for more than a dozen years, an intensely personal and private component of her faith is conveyed here. There is a shortage of social science research, however, that explores the impact of personal, relational connections with one’s God as described by Joshua, Omar, and Jessica.

**Influences of the individual-to-God connection**

Kim, an Asian American mother of two, has a husband who had been recently laid off from his job. She explains, “When it is a difficult time, I sing for God and I feel [much] better inside.” Note that Kim does not say that she sings
“about” God. She uses the very personal phrase, “I sing for God,” indicating a strong sense of relationship. The reported effect from her singing for God is that she “feels [much] better inside.” In the language of the social sciences, Kim’s relationship with God and her personal, sacred practice of singing for God reportedly serve as important coping resources.

On this same theme of religious practices and coping, Rashaad, an African American Christian and father of three, shares the following narrative.

(Other night at work) this individual picked the phone up and got nasty towards me, I mean nasty, i nate [and] I don’t know why. [I was so] angry that I wanted to go back there and confront this joker. That’s what my flesh wanted to do. Now this is where my faith kicked in...I wanted to go back there and kick in his behind, but my faith wouldn’t let me do it... The Lord told me, “This is a challenging time in your faith. Why you gonna act like the world? Don’t let something like that get you angry. Sometimes you have to pray for your enemies.” And I tell you...I was shaking...but I put my head down [and prayed]. Ten years ago there would have been no hesitation. I would have been on him... I would have either gotten fired or at least been at each other’s throats with this guy. But I just let it go. I prayed about it and the Lord told me, “Just let it go.”

Rashaad’s experience illustrates the influence of his relational prayer with his God. Note the pattern of dialogue that Rashaad reports: First, he felt that his God “told” him three things (“This is a challenging time in your faith,” “Don’t let [it] get you angry,” and “pray for your enemies”). Second, Rashaad obediently bowed his head and began to pray. Third, after he began praying he felt he received a second message telling him to “just let it go.” Rashaad’s narrative presents both internal and relational processes and, like Kim’s segment, illustrates the calming influence of a personal yet relational religious practice, which Rashaad feels may have saved him his job.

**The contrast between God and family relationships**

The strength of the individual-to-God relationship, at least for some, is evident in explanations like this one from Alisha, an African American Muslim mother of fifteen children (all fifteen are her biological children with her husband Rahim).

God (or Allah) is real. I talk to Him just like I’m talking to you... One thing I say to people [is], “Let no man get between you and God.” Your relationship with God is so important [that] we shouldn’t let anyone hold us back, not even friends, or a husband, or a sister or brother... We get stuff in our own time. We walk at a different pace, we can’t be looking at people who are not as far along as us and judge them. They’ve got to come at their own pace. However, I need to make sure nothing gets between God and me.

Alisha and other Muslims, as well as several Jews and Christians, reference a profound, personal connection to their God that exists somewhat independently of family relationships. It is essential to address and account for this quality of individual faith if we are to understand the influence of religious practices on marital and intergenerational levels.

**The importance of the spiritual belief that “I am a child of God”**

The belief of several participants that they, and all persons, are children of God reportedly impacted both participants’ sense of self and the way they view their own children. Patricia, a Christian mother of six, states,

---

In order to understand the meanings and influences of religious practices at the family level, it is first necessary to convey the importance of the individual-to-God relationship.
The [most important spiritual] belief I have [as an individual and as a parent is] that we are literal spirit children of our Father in Heaven and that He knows each one of us. As we get to know our children, we can almost guess what they're going to do in a lot of instances, but our Father in Heaven knows us even better than that. He knows what our challenges are, He knows what our strengths are, and He loves us unconditionally. We love our children unconditionally, even when they do things that just drive us crazy...things that are wrong. You would do anything to help them get back to where they need to be. Knowing that we have a Heavenly Father who cares even more about us than we care about our own children is a real strength. There is nothing that we will face in this life that we can't overcome with Him.

Patricia links her belief in her Father in Heaven with: (a) a deep awareness of the unconditional love that He has for her and all of us (e.g., “He knows each one of us...He knows what our challenges are, He knows what our strengths are, and He loves us unconditionally.”); (b) a connection with and understanding of her “Heavenly Father” that she experiences because she, like her God, is a parent; and (c) a strength in coping (e.g., “There is nothing that we will face in this life that we can't overcome with Him.”).

Patricia's husband, William, also comments on the "profound impact" of "knowing [he is] a child of God."

Our faith teaches us who we are and it teaches us something very different from what the world teaches us and that has a profound impact on our lives, the things we choose to do, the way we choose to spend our time, the circles that we get drawn into, and the circles that we stay out of. I think that knowing [I am] a child of God and that I am not just a biological aberration...has had a profound impact on me and on the things I have wanted to do. My faith tells me far more than world tells me about who I am.

William elaborates on the “profound impact” of his belief by delineating some areas of his life that were duly affected, including “the things we choose to do, the way we choose to spend our time, the circles that we get drawn into, and the circles that we stay out of.” In sum, this belief influences much of what goes on in William’s life. Of note is William’s use of both the singular and plural first-person pronouns (“I” and “we”) to indicate that this belief has pragmatic applications on both personal and familial levels.

When asked how important his faith is to his sense of identity and self-concept, Joseph, a Christian father of four, responds as follows.

Jesus...I don’t know where I’d be without [Him]. Well, I do know where I’d be without Him...I’d probably be dead or insane or addicted...I’d be a mess.... If [my relationship with God] wasn’t there, I wouldn’t know who I was. I would be ungrounded, I wouldn’t be me without Christ in me.... The whole way I construct my understanding of who I am is based in my relationship to God. Really, without that I don’t know who I am.... In relation to Him, I’m His child. I’ve been adopted. I’m His heir, I’m His brother, I’m His friend, I’m His servant, I’m His helper.

Joseph reports that “I wouldn’t be me without Christ in me.” Joseph cites many relationships with God (e.g., “heir, brother, friend, servant, helper”), but the first relationship Joseph establishes is “I’m His child.”

"Why do you believe in God?"

One interview question pushed a bit beyond descriptions of God (as Creator, Father, etc.) and asked participants why they believe in God. Omar responds to the question by relating this Arabic story.

---

Photo Credit: LDS Church

Marriage & Families
A Bedouin, who believed in God was asked by a man who did not believe, "Why do you believe in God? What can you tell me? How did you get to this realization?" The Bedouin said, "When I leave my camel in the desert, it goes back to where it came from. That tells me there is a God."

Omar's interpretation of the story is twofold. First, he explains, those who wish to see God will see Him in everything. On another level, just as the camel in the desert intuitively knew the way home, a person of faith is drawn—though in a strange world—toward his heavenly home. Similar analogies were also presented to me by Holly and her husband, Miguel who are Christians.

Miguel: (A desire to believe in God) is innate, it's intuitive... It's a hunger, and [a relationship with God] is what satisfies that hunger.

Holly: There's a hymn we sing at church that says, "As a deer longs for running streams, so I long for you." Faith is that longing and knowing that it's God [that you need]. Some people don't have that, but I've grown up with that and have the understanding as an adult that...I [need] God in some fashion and that it's a natural, instinctive thing. As you grow and learn more about yourself and your spirituality broadens and you understand certain things in relationship to God, you learn that you need to feed that faith.

Miguel: As you go through life and its steps, you seek fulfillment. We would say, "When we finish med school it'll be great. When I finish residency, it'll be great. When I get my own practice, it'll be great." But you get to each step and it's cool, but there's still that longing... That's why we need our faith. That's why faith is important to us, because ten years ago we were trying to "make it" but (making it) is not what satisfies the longing... Faith is the only thing that satisfies that hunger and that longing that seems insatiable.

While Omar compares faith to a kind of homing device, Miguel and Holly speak of a faith in God as "intuitive" and as the only cure for an inner hunger and longing that seem "insatiable," even with professional success. Muslim, Jewish, and Christian parents all invested on a variety of levels in this search for a spiritual home, including involvement in their faith communities where the interviewed parents rendered a reported average of more than ten percent of their income and twelve hours a week of their time.

The Indivisibility of Spiritual Beliefs and Family Perspectives

Although the highly religious parents I interviewed strived for a personal connection with God as previously discussed, this connection and related sacred beliefs were powerfully linked with family relationships as well, as illustrated by Seth, a Jewish father, who explains, "I don't know how to draw a line...between my [family] values and my religious values."

Children, Parenting, and Spiritual Beliefs

The connection between parent-child relationships and spiritual beliefs regarding children were discussed with richness and depth by the mothers and fathers I interviewed. William, a Christian father of six, offered the following response when I asked if he had any religious beliefs that influenced his relationships with his children.

(We believe) our children are an inheritance unto us from the Lord. In our case, none of them are "accidental" or unwanted, they came as a gift and as great blessings. Heavenly Father has been very powerful in our lives relative to them.

William's references to his children as "an inheritance from the Lord," "gifts," and "great blessings" seem to reflect a gratitude and respect for the children God has given him.

Jackie, an African-American Christian mother of three, similarly describes her three adopted children as gifts from God.

I always tell them...I tell my kids that they're a gift...I tell my kids that they're a gift because God chose me to be their mother, literally. It was the way that it came about. We (Rashaad and I) were sitting there and we were discussing, "Well, we have been trying all these years [ten years] and we haven't been able to have any kids, let's adopt kids." And
Rashaad was like, “Okay, we’re going to pray about it.” We did, ... “Lord, give us some kids.” [Now we’ve got three]. I always say that they are a gift, they are special to me. Everybody says, “Man, you treat them just like they are yours.” Well, they are mine! Because I always feel God gave them to me. I just have to do right by Him...they’re so special.

Jackie’s sense of her children as “gifts from God” is supplemented in her narrative by the correlating point that “God chose me to be their mother.” Jackie later explained how this sense of being “chosen” by God to be a mother to her daughters is a source of comfort when the parenting road gets rough, as it often does in connection with one daughter who was adopted much later in life and came from difficult circumstances that she is still trying to overcome.

Another interesting point relating to the faith-parenting connection is mentioned by Oui, a Korean Christian and father of two.

I think [children] change things... One thing [from having a child] is that we know how God loves us...how we treat our children [lovingly] is how He treats us. The good thing is that I understand how God feels about me. That’s [one] good thing; and I am always thinking that I have to be a good parent for my child in terms of faith in God. This keeps [pushing] my efforts to keep growing in my faith for my children. This is a good thing [as well].

Oui explained his increased sense of “how God feels about [him]” due to his role as a parent. He indicates that he feels a responsibility to “be a good parent in terms of faith” and that this pushes him to continue progressing and growing so that he can be a better father for his children.

**Marriage and Spiritual Beliefs**

Faith reportedly influenced not only parenting but also marriage. Specifically, faith-based beliefs in the importance of marriage and strong aversion to divorce were frequently expressed. As one Jewish father states, “Divorce is just not on our subset of values.” Jackie, an African-American Christian, adds,

“What God hath put together, let no man put asunder.” I don’t believe in divorce.... God has engrained my marriage in me so deeply.... [Some] women might say, “I don’t care if he [my husband] is mad or not.” Or “I don’t care if I spend all the money up.” But in my mind I’m thinking...I’ve got to get myself together and give [God and my husband] the honor of what this relationship means.... We’ve been together so long, married sixteen [years], and it’s not all been great but when they see Jackie, they want to know where Rashaad is.

Jackie’s commitment to marriage and aversion to divorce are apparent, but these avowals can have a downside. Another member of Jackie’s church explained to me that in her opinion there were several marriages in the congregation that should have ended years previously, but due to this congregation’s stigma on divorce, these marriages continued on for years and years. Islam, in doctrine, presents a different view from Jackie’s. Omar posits,

Islam is the first religion that gave women rights...rights of divorce, rights of inheritance, rights in the house, etc. Show me any other religion where a woman’s rights are explained as clearly and explicitly as in Islam. Not until the 17th or even 18th century did the [Christian] church [state] the rights of women within the church.

Angie discusses divorce from the perspective of a Muslim woman.

For me, my worst fear before marriage was divorce. I have divorced parents and saw some things that I didn’t really want to see.
When I learned about Islam, it told me that divorce was looked down upon but that a woman should divorce her husband if she was being abused... It tells you point blank, "If your husband does this, leave, you have God's blessing."

Although Angie drew some comfort from these rights afforded her by her faith, she also mentioned earlier that her husband’s commitment to his faith and to her had alleviated the fear of divorce that she expressed before her marriage.

Patricia, a Christian, and mother of six presents a final perspective on marriages rooted in spiritual beliefs.

In our religion, if you are married in the temple, we believe that marriage is not just for this earth, it’s for eternity, and when you think of your marriage for eternity that has a very definite impact on how you speak to each other, how you treat each other, how you raise your children, on everything you do. It’s not something where you say, “If this doesn’t work out, then we just won’t do it anymore.” This is a forever thing.

Patricia’s narrative reinforces the “very definite impact” that spiritual beliefs can have on marriage; in thoughts, words, and “everything you do.” The gravity of marriage as a timeless covenant for Patricia is also present through her discussion of “marriage for eternity” and as a “forever thing.”

The Sharing of Religious Beliefs
A correlation exists between religious shared beliefs in marriage and marital satisfaction, although the nature of the relationship is not certain. For example, some researchers have found that marital satisfaction tends to increase religiosity while other studies of long-term marriages have indicated that similarity in religious orientation, religious faith, and religious beliefs were frequently mentioned as key factors in marital success. The married parents in my sample similarly emphasized the importance of shared beliefs. A Jewish father said of his marriage, “Our values are always very, very close, which is why we’re so close.... It has positively affected our marriage.”

A more cultural aspect of the importance of shared religious belief was captured by Seth, a Jewish father of two. He explains,

I knew very early on that I wanted to marry Jewish. I never questioned that, I always knew. I always knew that it was the right path to take. I always believed, and still do, that the cultural upbringing of being Jewish is so deep that being married to someone who is not Jewish, they just wouldn’t get it. They wouldn’t laugh at the same jokes. They wouldn’t enjoy the same foods I enjoy on the same levels, you know [such as the holidays and rituals]? I thought, who would want to go through life not being able to share that and understand that?

Seth outlines his desire to marry within his faith in quite “unreligious” terms. Faith beliefs, we are reminded, are not only spiritual but also serve as a family framework and as foundations for culture and subculture. Indeed, for those who are deeply connected to their faith, faith’s influence may
literally carry into jokes, foods, holidays, rituals: in a word, life.

Belief in Marital Fidelity
Another influence of faith on marriage is exemplified by James’ statement on his belief in marital fidelity, another theme that recurred across interviews.

Interviewer: Are there any religious beliefs that have helped in your marriage?
James: Yes. [The belief that you should] be faithful to the marriage covenant. Not committing adultery. That belief does a lot. You take two different individuals from two different backgrounds; I come from this type of background and she comes from that type of background and you fall in love and put trust in that person. You give that person your all and you feel that the other person is doing the same thing. You don’t want to have to go through your life wondering if this person is going to be faithful to you, you don’t want to worry about that kind of mess.

For James, his wife, and other husbands and wives, shared spiritual beliefs regarding the importance of fidelity in marriage were reportedly a comfort and strength in an uncertain world.

Belief in God as a Marital Support
Participants also reported that beliefs in God offered marital support. Rashaad, an African-American Christian and father of three, states,

We both feel that a marriage is a bonding thing. As God says, “Whatever I join together let no man put asunder.” I believe that my faith made me love my wife a lot more. We are very different. If it weren’t for faith, I probably would have run a long time ago. [I’d have said], “You don’t want to do what I want to do. We just don’t see eye to eye. I’m gone.” But when you believe in God…yes, the boat still gets to rocking’ but the Bible says, “In me you can weather the storm.”

Jessica, a Christian mother of four, similarly discusses her faith and marriage.

We have disagreements, we have things we don’t see the same sometimes, and faith is a source of help. We can pray about things together and the Lord can help us work things out. Sometimes one person has to give in and accept the other person’s point of view, it helps to be able to pray about things. The Lord, He’s the best counselor you could ever have. I don’t know how marriages can work without God. I’m sure that there are people who are so compatible that they can still get along but (our faith) has been really helpful for us.

Both Rashaad and Jessica offer additional insight as to why shared faith was often helpful in their marriages. In addition to the earlier discussions of pro-marriage beliefs, the shared values and culture, and a mutual belief in marital fidelity, couples felt that God helped them to “weather the storm” by serving as a “counselor.” This pattern of turning to sacred beliefs and prayer during the “storms” and “disagreements” of marriage was mentioned by many as a facilitative approach to conflict resolution.

Centrality of Family in Faith
Family is a central component of most world faiths and particularly in monotheistic religions. Angie, a mother of two and convert to Islam, mentions that it was her husband’s families’ dedication to their faith and each other that initially drew her to Islam.

I was mesmerized by how dedicated [Omar and his brothers] were to their Mom and Dad…and wasn’t just their family. The people who were true to Islam [were the same].

Angie’s life now reflects this same inseparability of family life and faith. When asked how much time she spent each week in faith-related activities and family activities she responded in a combined answer.

Every minute of every day we devote to faith. Our religion is our way of life. We fit our life into our religion, not [our] religion into our life.

Although the faith and family connection had become salient and positive for Angie, the connec-
tion also carried pain for some. Oui and Kim both converted to Christianity as young adults in their native Korea, but none of their family members have joined them in their new-found faith. Oui soberly explains,

\[\text{We have a deep problem with religion with our families. So actually, that's the reason religion is not good sometimes. We can't have our relatives praying for us. That's a terrible feeling...it has been a challenge.}\]

While Kim and Oui had found a sense of joy and meaning in their faith, their faith had become a virtual line of demarcation between generations. Similarly, Seth, a Jewish father had two brothers who married outside the faith, causing pain to him and his parents and transforming their once shared religion into a source of “Di-vision” (two different visions). Whether accompanied by pain, or both, however, faith is integral in understanding all these families.

Perhaps Joseph captured the connection between family and faith best. Joseph felt the connection so powerfully that following our three-hour interview, he still expressed doubts regarding his ability to adequately communicate how profoundly faith influenced him and his family. In closing, he emphasized,

\[\text{There's something that...when as a family your hearts are pointed toward the same thing, and it's God, then parenting and economics and space and food and disagreements and hassles and joys and celebrations and all that other stuff...it works different, it seems different, it feels different... Our family is all oriented in the same way. Christ is king, He's center, He's what it's all about. What if there was no dinner? What if there was no Christmas? It wouldn't be as fun and warm and fuzzy but...I don't know how to convey to you that...yes, our faith informs our relationships and everything about us.}\]

When we seek to understand and even appreciate the struggle of families to answer life's most taxing and profound questions through their individual and familial walks of faith, we are more informed, more sensitive, and more aware of what others value and how they live. The value and importance of this topic, however, extends beyond heightened awareness.

**Conclusion**

Religious faith is the salient and inextricable thread and fabric in the quilt of family life for these families, and they cannot be adequately understood independent of their faith. I hope that through this glimpse into the lives of these mothers and fathers we will better understand those of various faiths and that many will learn from these faithful parents who taught me. Perhaps, as I did, you will feel a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood with these parents, who though different in denomination, have souls that are similarly seeking a sacred connection and communion with a real and relational God.

Loren Marks is an Assistant Professor of Family, Child, and Consumer Sciences at Louisiana State University. He and his wife, Sandra, have three children.

**References**

2. Pseudonyms are used throughout this article to protect participant anonymity.