




# Religion, Spirituality, and Fatherhood

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Religion and spirituality (R/S) are popular topics in psychology. The psychological study of R/S is a subspecialty in the field with a designated division (Division 36, Psychological Study of Religion and Spirituality), membership, and associated professional journals such as *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* and *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*. Several books, training programs, and conferences have been developed to address the integration of R/S into psychotherapy (Plante, 2009; Sisemore & Knabb, 2020). The popularity within psychology is reflective of societal trends as well as the subjective experience of individuals. For example, the United States is undergoing dramatic demographic shifts in religious affiliation with more people identifying as “unaffiliated” and fewer people remaining affiliated with Christianity and organized religions (PEW Research Center, 2019). Yet, belief in the Sacred, a higher power, God, and spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, mindfulness, and reading sacred texts all remain a meaningful part of many people’s lives. For example, at the time of this chapter’s writing in 2021, Fr. Michael Schmitz’s *Bible in the Year* is the top-ranked podcast in the United States by

offering a daily reading and reflection from the Bible, with the goal to finish the entire Bible in 365 days.

Given such meaning for many people, social science researchers have examined associations between religiosity and spirituality with various health outcomes. A recent study from Harvard University’s *Human Flourishing Project* found that those who regularly attended religious services were, on average, less likely to become depressed, smoke, or drink heavily and benefit from higher life satisfaction, purpose in life, and other indicators of flourishing among a nationally representative sample of thousands of participants (Chen et al., 2020). Research, of course, has reported mixed findings about the health benefits of religious attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors depending on the methodology, participants, variables, and outcomes. Religious/spiritual affiliations, beliefs, and behaviors can be a salient factor in people’s health and well-being. Specifically for adult men, R/S have been identified as important but overlooked pathways to positive health outcomes such as enhanced coping, meaning in life, and social support (Garfield et al., 2013). The pathway to such outcomes may be altered by adherence to masculinity ideology as well as other contextual and cultural factors (Isacco & Wade, 2019). As a result, the intersections of religion and health among adult men may also be associated with negative health outcomes such as shame, vengeful feelings, and interpersonal

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discord. Although R/S have been studied based on gender and between sexes of adult men and women, scholarship with fathers has been scarce.

The American Psychological Association considers R/S as key variables and identities that are integrated into multicultural competence in working with diverse individuals, groups, families, and communities (APA, 2017). In this chapter, we focus on how R/S are salient factors to fathers and their families. We describe how R/S influence fathers and their parenting. We also highlight a specific connection between fathering, R/S, and parenting that fosters moral development among children. Such a connection appears to be a unique contribution to child development. The chapter concludes with practical implications for working with fathers and families from various psychological modalities. Overall, the chapter advances a needed multicultural perspective to the robust fatherhood scholarship and serves as a catalyst for future directions of research.

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## Religious and Spiritual Influences on Fatherhood

Religion and spirituality are often presented in unison because of conceptual overlap in social science research and the subjective experience of individuals and communities. For example, many people attend a religious service at a place of worship associated with an organized religion and would consider their attendance a part of their spirituality. Yet, it is important to understand the distinctiveness of the constructs and their unique definitions. We acknowledge that stating definitions of R/S has been historically difficult in the social sciences and that there are not any universally agreed upon definitions (Park et al., 2017). For the purposes of this chapter and given the lack of universal agreement, we do not adhere to singular definitions of religion or spirituality. Rather, we conceptualize religion as involving several common components across definitions: (a) organized faith community; (b) associated teachings, traditions, and rituals; (c) an emphasis on a moral code; and (d) individual expressions

of faith beliefs and practices (Dollahite, 1998; Worthington Jr. & Aten, 2009). The major world religions such as Christianity, Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism are examples of religion. Within the context of examining religion, psychology is also interested in studying religiousness or religiosity, which is the degree to which an individual adheres to attitudes, values, beliefs, and practices of their religion. Spirituality is similarly conceptualized but with distinct features such as (a) more individualist or subjective, (b) a pursuit of meaning in life, (c) a sense of connectedness (d) wholeness, (e) awareness of transcendence, and (f) a sense of a higher, immaterial reality (Saucier & Skrzypiąńska, 2006). The components of both R/S also reflect some of the common subconstructs that are part of scholarly inquiry, which have associated definitions and measurement tools (see Table 2 for examples).

This section of the chapter reviews religious/spiritual constructs related to fatherhood. First, we present the only known national descriptive data on fathers' religious affiliations, practices, and beliefs. The data were gathered from the PEW Research Center Religious Landscape Survey with men and parents (2018) and fathers (2014, see Table 1 for full data). The PEW data are descriptive and, as a result, limited in terms of drawing more meaningful inferences. However, the data indicate that a slight majority of fathers are affiliated with a major religion, but most fathers do not have a certain belief in God, do not attend a regular religious service, and do not exhibit spiritual awareness on a regular basis either. The descriptive data from PEW are consistent with an overall narrative that men from western countries, such as the United States, are less religious than women (Trzebiatowska & Bruce, 2012). Lay beliefs may suggest that men tend to reengage with R/S at fatherhood because it can be a natural point of reengagement after a time of developmental individuation and existential searching. The PEW data present a counterpoint to that belief and are consistent with more current research that has found that individuals "check out" of organized religion earlier in their development (ages 13–25) and do not tend to return

**Table 1** Religious affiliation, beliefs, and practices

Religious/spiritual variables	Men	Women	Parents of children under 18	Fathers <sup>a</sup> 2014
Religious affiliation	43%	57%	79%	52%
Unaffiliated “nones”	57%	43%	21%	48%
Certain belief in God	57%	69%	66%	44%
Religion is very important in life	47%	59%	57%	39%
Religious service attendance (once per week)	31%	40%	38%	40%
Individual prayer (daily–weekly)	62%	79%	75%	44%
Individual meditation (weekly)	37%	43%	39%	41%
R/S small group (weekly–monthly)	29%	37%	38%	41%
Feeling of peace and wellbeing (weekly)	53%	64%	59%	40%
Wonder of the universe (weekly)	46%	45%	43%	46%
R/S as primary source of right and wrong guidance	28%	38%	35%	39%
Read scripture (weekly)	30%	40%	38%	39%
Belief in Heaven	67%	76%	75%	41%
Belief in Hell	56%	59%	63%	43%

<sup>a</sup>Percentages from PEW Research Religious Landscape Study (2018 and 2014)

when compared to past generations (McCarty & Vitek, 2017).

While fathers may be less practicing of R/S, we considered how religious/spiritual beliefs, practices, and involvement might facilitate positive fathering. The salience of this discussion is likely focused on various diverse subgroups of fathers that place social and cultural importance on their R/S. Two specific constructs emerged in our literature review: parental sanctification and religious coping. Sanctification is defined as “a process through which aspects of life are perceived as having divine character and significance” (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005, p. 183). Parental sanctification is simply the view that the work of a parent is imbued with “divine character and significance.” Religious coping refers to efforts to “understand and deal with life stressors in ways related to the sacred” (Pargament et al., 2011, p. 52). Researchers have found that specific religious factors such as the view of parenting as sanctified and positive religious coping strongly correlated with increased positive father involve-

ment (Dumas & Nissley-Tsiopinis, 2006; Lynn et al., 2016). Religious coping may help fathers overcome emotional barriers to enhance their engagement with their children as stress management, coping, and emotional stability are helpful to parenting. Viewing parenting as a sanctified role may facilitate father involvement by prompting men to attach a greater meaning and purpose to their fathering. Such an interpretation is congruent with the research on nonreligious worldviews, as greater nontheistic sanctification and higher levels of spiritual disclosure were significantly related to increased parent–child relationship quality (Brelsford, 2013). Thus, fathers who consider their parenting within a spiritual context and discuss that spirituality with their children will be deepening their fathering relationships. Brelsford’s (2013) findings and the associated inference make sense as spirituality is considered a “deeper topic” that can facilitate intimacy in relationships, when discussed with openness, vulnerability, and mutual respect.

For fathers with theistic and nontheistic views of parenting, sanctification appears to fit well with the construct of generativity. Generativity is derived from Erikson's psychosocial stages of development and is defined as the task of caring for the next generation. Generative fathering is often associated with R/S because the focus is on a consistent pursuit of a good that is beyond the individual needs and desires of a father, that is, beyond the self. The good may be material and/or immaterial, practical, and/or aspirational. The generative father may be self-sacrificial, but generativity assumes that the father is caring for the next generation of children. Generative fatherhood is considered a core characteristic of positive masculinity, that is, healthy, prosocial expressions of traditional male gender socialization (Kiselica et al., 2016), and has direct implications of a narrative counseling approach that is described later in this chapter.

In addition, there are direct and indirect benefits of fathers being involved in a religious/spiritual community. For example, the Catholic Church dedicated the year 2021 to St. Joseph, the identified foster father of Jesus. Books, talks, workshops, courses, and prayer groups have all been offered this past year and have focused on spiritual fatherhood. Men, fathers, families, and children were exposed to a positive model of fatherhood on a large scale. Although no empirical studies have been published at this point, anecdotal evidence suggests that the benefits of such a focus on the spiritual fatherhood of St. Joseph have been clear in Catholic communities (Maro, 2021, personal communication). Basic social learning theory posits that individuals learn from role models; thus, it is reasonable to hypothesize that fathers exposed to the model of St. Joseph may learn some fathering behaviors such as humility, family presence, and spousal support (Hicks, 2021).

More generalizable to men of other religious and spiritual traditions, it is worth noting that engagement in a religious community can promote interpersonal support, friendships, and other socioemotional benefits for men (Isacco & Wade, 2019). Religious communities and congregations often have men's clubs and ministries, including specific outlets for fathers that promote

positive family contributions. Thus, it is plausible to hypothesize that some fathers would enhance their involvement and parenting practices by participation in focused religious-spiritual activities. Often, a basic intervention is to assist fathers with enhancing their social support. Practitioners are well-positioned to explore with fathers how they may connect with religious sources of social support. The religious social support may help fathers to deepen relationships with like-minded men of similar values, foster accountability, and be further exposed to positive role models. Future research and clinical practice would benefit from more healthcare-religious community partnerships that serve as a catalyst for collaborative interventions and ongoing program evaluation efforts.

In addition to interpersonal factors, social science research has found that individuals construct cognitive schemas and mental representations of God (Isacco & Wade, 2019). These schemas and representations are referred to in several ways such as God concepts, God representations, and God Images and are often based on an individual's religious tradition, spirituality, and theological beliefs. For example, within a Judeo-Christian framework, a fundamental tenet is that God has revealed Himself to be a Father. In this context, men may have spent time and energy conjuring up many thoughts about God as a Father and wondered what type of father they should be based on those schemas, images, and representations. For example, fathers that view God as a distant, judging, removed father may act similarly with their own children, whereas fathers that think of God as a loving, caring, nurturing father may exhibit those characteristics. There are established benefits for both the father and children's health to the latter images and behaviors (Isacco & Wade, 2019).

Like many complex areas of social science inquiry, the extant literature in this area indicates that constructs of religiosity and spirituality are associated with both positive and negative health outcomes in adult samples in the United States and internationally (Koenig, 2009; Shattuck & Muehlenbein, 2020). The divergent and nuanced health pathways are reflective of the old adage, "one size does not fit all." The empirical findings

do not lead to an all-or-nothing conclusion such as R/S is all good for all fathers or all bad for all fathers. Rather, extreme scores and rigid (non-) adherence to certain R/S constructs seems to be associated with some negative outcomes, and the positive outcomes emerge within a balanced range or “middle ground” between extremes. Such a pattern recalls a poignant lesson learned in Ancient Greek Philosophy as Aristotle taught in *Nicomachean Ethics* that virtue is the mean in between extremes (Crisp, 2014). Clinically, we have worked with fathers that drew resilience and coping from their religious beliefs and practices, while we have also seen religious beliefs compound feelings of shame and contribute to scrupulosity. In a similar way, we expect that some fathers will be positively and negatively influenced by religious and spiritual factors. Complicating the picture but reflective of the realities of the lived experience, we anticipate that for some fathers, it is not a clear either/or situation, but that they have both positive and negative experiences stemming from R/S. Those experiences may shift over time and depending on various other mediating and moderating variables such as family, children, and parenting.

While a plethora of studies explore how R/S are connected to health outcomes for the general population, there is little research specifically with samples of fathers. The small extant literature provides some helpful insights into the impact of R/S on fathers and their families. For example, a meta-analytic review of 94 studies found that greater religiousness was positively related to marital functioning and more positive parenting practices among fathers (Mahoney et al., 2001). Marriage is often situated within a religious tradition and corresponding beliefs. Thus, one reasonable inference to draw is that religiosity may strengthen the marital bond for fathers, and in turn, a strong marital bond is associated with several familial outcomes such as positive communication, marital longevity, and role modeling for children. We also offer some speculation on the underlying mechanism(s) to the positive association between religiosity and marital bond. For example, most major world religions promote marriage as a valued vocation and life-long commitment; thus, fathers may

internalize those beliefs in a manner that increases their family involvement. Another possible mechanism is that many religious teachings emphasize service to others and self-sacrifice, which may direct fathers away from impulsive decision-making, selfishness, and reinforce a greater responsibility to their family and the value of generative fatherhood. Those possible mechanisms as well as others are worthy of continued empirical exploration in diverse samples of fathers that practice various religious and spiritual traditions.

As described in other chapters of this handbook, the prevailing model of father involvement involves three primary domains: engagement, accessibility, and responsibility (Lamb et al., 1985). DeMaris, Mahoney, and Pargament et al. (2011) found that religiousness was associated with father involvement in baby care vis-a-vis engagement when coupled with other variables such as personality traits and marital quality. One explanation for such a finding is that some religions (e.g., Mainline Protestantism) promote egalitarianism in marriages, including equal involvement in childcare (Wilcox, 1998). In addition, scales have been developed to measure specific religious variables that promote positive parental engagement. These scales include the seven-item positive coping scale (turning to God for parental support) (Dumas & Nissley-Tsiopinis, 2006), Manifestation of God in Parenting Scale (Mahoney et al., 1999), and Sacred Qualities of Parenting Scale (Mahoney et al., 2003) (See Table 2). Specific descriptive data from the use of those scales are presented in Table 3 and provide a counter perspective to the PEW data, as higher percentages of fathers endorsed theistic and nontheistic spiritual beliefs about their parenting experiences. Yet, in a study of 169 couples in the United States, high scores in biblical conservatism were correlated with fewer hours of average daily infant care among fathers (DeMaris et al., 2011). Similarly, greater Christian conservatism was associated with the use of corporal punishment by fathers (Mahoney et al., 2001). Such findings infer that some aspects of religiosity/spirituality may negatively alter fathering. Simple directional associations in various studies are likely to produce mixed

results depending on the constructs, participants, and outcomes being examined. The use of new scales and posing more complex research questions suggests that recent research is evolving to better pinpoint the specific religious and spiritual variables in subgroups of fathers that might moderate or mediate father involvement and have direct or indirect effects on paternal and child health and wellness.

Indeed, father involvement is a construct that is positive in nature and was intended to measure a father’s positive engagement, accessibility, and responsibility with their children (Pleck, 2007). Thus, it makes sense that most research has found positive correlations between father involvement and positive child development outcomes. This section of the chapter considers extending and specifying the impact of father involvement on child development by further factoring in R/S.

First, theories of fatherhood posit that the health of fathers and children have bidirectional pathways (Garfield et al., 2010). The first pathway is that father health influences child health. Within this pathway, we considered the robust scholarship that has identified the positive outcomes associated with religious and spiritual attitudes, beliefs, and practices in adult samples. For example, fathers that exhibit positive religious coping, tap into religious support, pray/meditate on a regular basis, and engage in a relationship with the Sacred are likely to experience positive mental health benefits (Isacco & Wade, 2019). In turn, following the established pathway, the benefits that fathers experience are likely to have a positive impact on child health. For example, a child may learn important religious coping skills to deal with challenges and expand their network of support through the religious community. Moreover, religious communities are likely to promote positive models of fatherhood (e.g., St. Joseph in Catholic-Christian denominations) and encourage fathers to be more active in their family life. The encouragement, support, and role models may prompt fathers to be more engaged,

**Table 2** Religious and spiritual assessment tools

Religious/spiritual domain	Assessment tool
Religious coping	The Brief RCope (Pargament et al., 2011)
Meaning in life	Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006) Meaning in Life Index (Francis & Hill, 2008)
Religious adherence	Religious Fundamentalism Scale (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992)
Religious commitment	Religious Commitment Inventory (Worthington Jr. et al., 2003)
Relationship with God	Attitudes toward God Scale (Wood et al., 2010)
Religious experiences	Religious Experience Questionnaire (Edwards, 1976)
Prayer	Multidimensional Prayer Inventory (Laird et al., 2004)
Church involvement	Church Involvement Measure (Mattis et al., 2003)
Church community	How It Feels at Church Survey (Baard, 1994)
Religion and parenting	Manifestation of God in Parenting Scale (Mahoney et al., 1999) Sacred Qualities of Parenting Scale (Mahoney et al., 2003)

**Table 3** Religion, spirituality, and parenting<sup>a</sup>

Scale and items	Mother	Fathers
<i>Sacred qualities of parent–infant relationship and parenting</i>		
In my relationship with my baby, I experience a connection with something greater than myself.	88%	79%
Being the mother/father of my baby is sacred to me.	86%	81%
<i>Manifestation of god of parent–infant relationship and parenting</i>		
Being a mother/father is a reflection of God’s will for me.	82%	75%
I sense God’s presence in my relationship with my baby.	82%	75%

<sup>a</sup>Data taken from <https://www.bgsu.edu/arts-and-sciences/psychology/graduate-program/clinical/the-psychology-of-spirituality-and-family/research-findings/parenting/sanctification-of-parenting.html>



accessible, and responsible, which further contributes to the positive development among children (Dollahite et al., 2002; Dienhart & Daly, 1997; Doherty et al., 1998; Gerson, 1997). Enhanced religious coping and support are beneficial in their own right and are known to contribute to other indicators of health such as less stress, anxiety, and depressive feelings (Garfield et al., 2013). It is reasonable to infer that fathers in good mental health are likely to positively impact their children.

The second pathway is that children influence father's health. For example, the transition to fatherhood is often considered "a jolt" for fathers and a catalyst for positive lifestyle changes such as increased exercise and improved diet (Garfield et al., 2010). Within this line of research, having children has been shown to increase religious and spiritual attitudes and behaviors among men (Palkovitz & Palm, 1998). The underlying assumption of that data is that the increase in religious/spiritual attitudes and behaviors is part of a pathway to other health outcomes for fathers, as influenced by the transition to fatherhood, that is, the presence of children.

In addition, the psychological study of R/S has evolved to include more constructs and more specific constructs (e.g., biblical conservatism). From this bidirectional model of fatherhood, an interesting follow-up study could explore how fathers translate religious and spiritual beliefs into parenting practices with their children. Do fathers become more empathetic, responsible, and/or emotionally attuned to their children because of the influence of their religious community? Relatedly, do fathers experience advances in their moral, spiritual, and emotional development because of any changes to their parenting attributable to religious/spiritual factors? The extant literature would benefit from studies that aim to answer some of these research questions. Further research is needed to examine these complex health pathways between fathers and children, specifically within a religious/spiritual context.

Second, how do parents influence the practice of R/S by their children? We hear competing narratives in our clinical practice with adults, as

some clients discuss how they practice the religion of their parents while other clients discuss their individuation from the religious/spiritual practices of their parents. When the question is focused solely on fathers, a study from Sweden is commonly cited. Haug and Wanner (2000) found that the religious practice of fathers was the most significant predictor of church attendance among their children, even when controlling for various other family and maternal variables. In the Swedish study, the regular religious practice of the father led to between two-thirds and three-quarters of their children becoming churchgoers to some degree. In a study of two-parent African American families in the United States, a strong correlation was reported between the father's religious practices (e.g., prayer, attending services) and the practices of their children during adolescence (Halgunseth et al., 2016). Thus, emergent research, across time and diverse participants, points to the importance of fathers in the transmission of religious practice among children. The theoretical explanations for the findings are varied. For example, the authors (Haug & Wanner, 2000) contend that children take their cues and conceptions of the outside world more from the father. As a result, if they see their father engage the outside world via religious practices, then the children will follow suit. Similarly, many Judeo-Christian religions consider the father to be the "head of the household" or spiritual leader in the family; thus, a basic explanation is that children are simply following the lead of their fathers. Future research may be able to shed additional light on these findings by asking adult children how their father influenced their religiosity and spirituality.

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## Fathering and Child Moral Development

As stated earlier, morality is a common component of religion. Michael Aquilina, a popular Catholic author, emphasized this point in his account of early Christianity, as he described how Christianity established an unusually high moral bar for those living in the pagan societies of

ancient Rome and Greece (Aquilina & Papandrea, 2015). Accordingly, religion may influence the moral component of parenting. Understanding how fathers influence their children to live congruently with a moral code is an important consideration. Child moral development may represent a unique focus area in this chapter on religion, spirituality, and fatherhood. Fathers are often considered primary disciplinarians, and the moral development of their children may fall within their parental responsibility for religious and family reasons. We contend that fathers can play a critical role in the moral development of their children, “for most children, parents are the original source of moral guidance” (Damon, 1999, p. 77).

Lawrence Kohlberg developed the foundational theory of moral development; he proposed three levels of moral reasoning, with each level consisting of two stages: (1) Level 1 is marked by self-interest and motivated by punishment and reward, (2) Level 2 is focused on social approval and motivated by interpersonal relationships and social order, and (3) Level 3 is directed at higher, abstract ideals and involves university rights and social contracts. Similar to other stage theories of that era, Kohlberg’s theory has since been critiqued, and additional theories of moral development have emphasized divergent foci such as biological factors, stress and socialization, and intellectual development (Damon, 1999). Still, regardless of theory, moral development is a complex, longitudinal process involving individualized thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are exhibited across contexts and reasons. The core of moral development, however, is the child learning right from wrong, good from bad, altruistic, and prosocial values from deviant and anti-social tendencies. Those distinctions are pivotal to the transfer of moral development to daily actions ranging from honesty on schoolwork, vandalism, underage alcohol or drug use, risky sexual behavior, and bullying.

Some scholarship has pointed to how parenting styles (authoritative, permissive, and authoritarian) impact children’s moral development, with the authoritative style playing the most positive role because such a style focuses on estab-

lishing consistent rules and firm limits while also encouraging open discussions with their children (Qi, 2019). Not surprisingly, harsh parenting practices that are consistent with the authoritarian parenting style have been correlated with aggressive behaviors and moral disengagement among children (Qi, 2019). Certainly, open discussions between fathers and their children are important to establish clear expectations, connections between their religious beliefs and moral behaviors, and religious/spiritual guidance that can factor into the child’s moral decision-making (Augustine & Stifter, 2015). Such discussions may be important for a father to role model to his children about how he works through moral conflicts and decisions within the context of any religious or spiritual consideration. A simple example may be that a father explains that he had an opportunity to cheat on a test but did not because of the 10 Commandments and cheating is similar to stealing answers. In doing so, the father is helping his children to develop their conscience, which is a key mechanism for limiting impulsive behavior and facilitating self-regulatory and rule-compatible behaviors (Augustine & Stifter, 2015). Religions have similar teachings about “the conscience” as the social sciences. For example, Kochanska and Aksan (2006) consider the conscience as a complex system of self-regulation of moral emotions, behavior, and cognitions. Catholicism (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1997) defines the conscience as a judgment of reason that helps a person to recognize right from wrong and the moral quality of an action. Similarly, the Catholic teaching and psychological literature both emphasize the importance of self-introspection and self-examination as internal mechanisms that are needed to understand and follow the conscience more clearly. An area of future research would be to explore how fathers foster those internal mechanisms in their children and the impact on moral development.

In addition to role modeling intentional moral decision-making, fathers may focus on teaching their children three additional socialization skills that are considered part of the moral self: (1) *Perspective-taking*, which is the ability to see a



situation from a different point of view. Perspective-taking is considered important for exhibiting empathy towards others, which is counter to narcissistic and antisocial tendencies that are associated with immoral behavior; (2) *Social negotiation* is the process of learning and responding to boundaries, structure, and rules. Small children tend to learn social negotiation through play, and fathers have been shown to engage in rough and tumble play with their children, which facilitates the learning of boundaries (Oren & Oren, 2009). (3) *Scaffolding* entails emotional regulation, joint problem-solving, warmth, and responsiveness to others. Thus, their moral behavior and development are contextualized within their social relationships and include their emotional intelligence. More current father involvement theories and measures have included emotional nurturance. Thus, fathers have a unique opportunity to demonstrate and encourage emotional expression and regulation with their children in a manner that connects with their moral development. Fathers may impact moral development by helping their children understand their impact on others and nurturing the internal factors of decision-making and emotions that are important to the child's moral self.

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## Practical and Clinical Applications

Religion and spirituality have been integrated into various psychological and mental health interventions, including individual, group, and psychoeducational modalities (Plante, 2009; Worthington Jr. & Aten, 2009). Such integration is considered part of cultural humility and multicultural competence, which enhances the therapeutic alliance and is correlated with improved treatment adherence and outcomes (APA, 2017). Integration of R/S into clinical practice usually starts with an appropriate assessment. In the assessment, a practitioner can take the time to explore the client's faith or spirituality in an open-ended manner or through structured questionnaires (Table 2). An interdisciplinary, short, and well-regarded assessment tool includes five simple questions to ask a client (Garfield, Isacco,

& Sahker, 2013): (1) Do your religious or spiritual beliefs provide comfort and support or do they cause stress? (2) How would these beliefs influence your health decisions? (3) Do you have any beliefs that might interfere or conflict with your health care? (4) Are you a member of a religious or spiritual community and is it supportive? (5) Do you have any spiritual needs that someone should address? Those questions are designed to provide preliminary insight into the client's religious affiliation, influence on health care, and impact on client health. The questions can be tailored to fathers or new questions can be added, such as (1) how does your R/S influence how you raise your children? (2) how has your R/S shaped who you are as a father? Both questions are open-ended, exploratory, and phrased in a manner to generate additional discussion and insight.

We suggest that providing an opportunity for fathers to explore these important questions can enhance and deepen the therapeutic alliance. If a father wonders about the relevance of such questions, the practitioner may view the questioning as an opportunity to provide psychoeducation about research indicating that their own religious and spiritual practices impact their child(ren)'s health and development. In addition to the open-ended questions, practitioners may utilize various self-report scales that assess different religious and spiritual constructs that may be relevant to fathers within the specific practical setting. See Table 2 for specific constructs and assessment tools. It is worth noting that these scales also have been used in several research studies and can be used in future studies with fathers to examine their religiosity and spirituality in relation to their health and impact on the family system.

Assessment is an ongoing process that complements counseling interventions. This section explores individual, couples, and family counseling with fathers focused on the integration of R/S. First, scholars have applied the concept of generative fathering (discussed previously in the chapter) to a narrative therapy approach with fathers (Dollahite et al., 2002). Generative fathering, which has a focus on establishing and nurturing an ethical relationship with children, provides an aspirational framework for individ-

ual counseling with fathers. A clinical approach consistent with generative fathering may imbue a greater sense of meaning from fathers and capitalize on their strengths and desire to be a father that will be good for their children. Integrating R/S into narrative therapy might include asking the father what role the Sacred plays in his relationship with his child(ren) and orienting the father to match his paternal aspirations to those of his faith traditions. The theoretical framework of generative fathering allows practitioners to connect meaning with their parenting and their religious/spiritual values and beliefs. For fathers of particular religious and spiritual backgrounds, such work may be instrumental in understanding the divine significance for their fathering role. Individual counseling with fathers may benefit from the integration of other religious/spiritual constructs such as religious coping, religious support, and their relationship with the divine, as described earlier in the chapter (Isacco & Wade, 2019).

Religious values, faith beliefs, and moral congruence can be points of connection or conflict among couples. Religious and spiritual factors have been found to increase marital cohesion, satisfaction, and communication (Marks, 2005), supporting the old adage “the couple that prays together, stays together.” Couples that present for couples counseling may have drifted apart on previously shared core values and beliefs. Other couples may be seeking support through couples counseling because of difficulty practicing their faith beliefs. Couples may seek counseling for various other reasons, but the general point is that practitioners can explore the role of R/S with the couple. The exploration may include identifying the religious/spiritual influences of roles and expectations within the couple. For example, Judeo-Christian anthropology considers men to be “patriarchs” within their family. The degree to which a man has integrated such an anthropology into their identity likely affects his spousal relationship in general and has a trickle-down effect on communication, conflict resolution, and relationship expectations. Practitioners may help couples to identify and to discuss those religious and spiritual influences in more constructive

ways. Couples counseling may also focus on assisting the couple to connect with other sources of religious support, such as marriage ministries in their community. A common couples counseling intervention is to institute and engage in regular “Summit Meetings” that clarify expectations and experiences in the relationship (Gottman & Silver, 2015). These meetings pose three simple questions about the relationship, which can be tailored to incorporate specific check-ins about the couple’s faith, spirituality, and religiosity. Example questions include: (1) What is something that is going well in our relationship because of our religion, spirituality, and faith? (2) What is something that we are having difficulty with as a couple related to our religion, spirituality, and faith? (3) Is there anything about our faith that we would like to do differently as a couple?

Family counseling may be similar to couples counseling with interventions between parents. In this section, we refer to family counseling as at least involving the father and his child(ren). Unfortunately, fathers may be underrepresented in family counseling for various reasons such as single-parent households, nonresidence, incarceration, military service, complex co-parenting dynamics from a divorce or marital discord and poor help-seeking attitudes and behaviors from fathers (Isacco et al., 2016). Some fathers may be absent from family counseling because of religious reasons, such as preferring to seek help from a priest/rabbi/religious leader instead, relying on spiritual practices for changes, and/or perceiving mental health services as incongruence with their faith beliefs. When practitioners are exploring why a father may not be present in family counseling, it is important to assess any religious/spiritual factors. Assuming it is ethical and legal as well as clinically indicated, practitioners are encouraged to explore creative outreach efforts to engage fathers that have religious/spiritual barriers to family counseling involvement. Destigmatizing counseling, expressing explicit support for their religiosity/spirituality, and demonstrating other multicultural competence about the role of R/S in their identity, family, fathering, and culture could all help engage the father and build a therapeutic alliance that will benefit the

family counseling process (American Psychological Association, 2017).

Family counseling that involves the father, child(ren), and other parent may integrate R/S in a clinically and culturally competent manner. Using the narrative therapy approach associated with generative fathering, practitioners may prompt fathers to explain to their child(ren) how they want to create a meaningful life and legacy in the family and how the divine plays a role in their future. Practitioners may also incorporate the skills associated with moral development. Family counseling interventions can work with the family to develop competence in boundaries, differentiating between right and wrong according to their religious/spiritual belief system, establishing a family ethical code and mission statement, social negotiation, perspective taking, and empathic regard for others. Some families may also prefer to incorporate prayer, meditation, or mindfulness into their counseling sessions to connect their clinical work with their faith traditions (Abernethy et al., 2006; Henry, 2015).

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## Conclusions and Future Directions of Research

The extant research and scholarship on religion, spirituality, and fatherhood are both informative and in need of continued development. Future research has several areas of inquiry that would deepen the empirical base and contribute to more empirically-supported interventions. On a national level, updated descriptive data is needed to better understand the current religious and spiritual attitudes, beliefs, and practices of fathers. Ongoing and more nuanced correlational studies can better identify specific pathways between religious and spiritual constructs measured among fathers and child development outcomes. Those studies would benefit from replication efforts across diverse samples of fathers and children according to race, ethnicity, religious affiliations, age, child gender, and other diverse family constellations. Similar studies are needed to understand correlations with paternal health and wellness outcomes. For example, how

do religious attendance, sacred reading, and/or prayer engagement impact paternal social-emotional health? The intersections of masculinity, fatherhood, and religion/spirituality have not been fully elucidated. Future research is wide-open in terms of exploring those points of intersection and how those various social identities impact family health outcomes and parenting practices. As mentioned earlier, there would be immense interest in longitudinal studies that identify the mechanism in which fathers transmit faith beliefs and practices to their children in ways that keep their children connected to those faith traditions across the lifespan.

Finally, the prevailing models of fatherhood are focused on father involvement as measured by engagement, accessibility, and responsibility with updates that include other dimensions of caregiving (Lamb et al., 1985; Pleck, 2010). The psychological sciences have caught up to the updated and newer theoretical models by developing newer father involvement measures and scales (see Singley et al., 2018). R/S constructs may deepen mainstream theory and measurement of fathering beyond father involvement to the study of father's love for their children. The primary role of parents is to love their children. The major world religions, secular-humanists, and affiliated and unaffiliated spiritualities ultimately all boil down to the love of the divine and the love of others. A scientific agenda focused on the study of paternal love for their child(ren) would be a unique contribution. Interdisciplinary perspectives from theology, philosophy, psychology, family studies, human development, and the psychological study of R/S would be needed to advance this line of inquiry.

Religious and spiritual considerations within fatherhood are understudied but important. Studies have found that a father's religiosity and spirituality influence parenting practices, child development outcomes, and paternal health. Practitioners are encouraged to integrate religious and spiritual factors into assessment, individual, couples, and family counseling to enhance the therapeutic process, align with the client's culture, deepen the therapeutic alliance, and offer impactful interventions for diverse fathers and

families. Future research is ripe with many opportunities to better understand the intersections of religion, spirituality, and fatherhood.

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