

Marriage and Family, Faith, and Spirituality among Emerging Adults

Annette Mahoney*

Bowling Green State University

Introduction

Journalists love a scandal, especially when it involves family life and religion. Recall these recent headlines:

- December 2008: Bristol Palin becomes an unmarried, teenage mother; her mother is a staunch evangelical Christian and Republican vice presidential nominee.
- April 2009: After Mel Gibson's mistress becomes pregnant, his wife of 28 years and mother of his six children files for divorce; Mel is a devout Catholic and director/producer of *The Passion of the Christ*, a \$370 million hit accused of inflaming intolerance of Jews.
- June 2009: Governor Mark Sanford becomes tearful as he explains his extramarital affair, saying, "I had met my soul mate"; he and his wife spent the prior six months attending a weekly religious support group for couples.

With headlines like these, many emerging adults may doubt whether religion offers anything to strengthen American marriages and families. Hypocrisy seems to abound. Leaders of evangelical Christians (about 25% of the U.S. population) seem to dominate the airwaves on faith and family. "Christianity" often seems synonymous with Biblical fundamentalist rhetoric that elevates one particular type of family to a social and sacred pedestal—namely, the 1950s middle-class vision of a breadwinner father married to a stay-at-home mother of their biological offspring. Could this be one reason emerging adults flee organized religion? How might congregations convince them that faith does matter for family relationships? Given that websites and self-help books on spirituality

* Annette Mahoney is a professor of psychology at Bowling Green State University.

emphasize the pursuit of individual happiness and well-being, with no mention of marriage or parenthood, it is a difficult endeavor indeed.

Yet scientific evidence does show that religion matters to contemporary marriages and families, and it is important that adults of all ages know about such findings. In this essay, I present three key points for congregations, their ministers, and emerging adults to know about research on faith and family life. Specifically, I describe religion's role in forming and sustaining family relationships. Next, I highlight specific religious beliefs and practices about marital and parent-child relationships that help to sustain these ties. Finally, I demonstrate that scholars know next to nothing about how religion operates, for better or worse, when families are dysfunctional or fall apart.

Forming Family Relationships

Let me start with the role that religion seems to play in forming family bonds. This helps keep straight the fact that profound theological conflicts exist in our culture about what kinds of family units should be formed and then promoted as the ultimate spiritual ideal. For instance, controversies exist as to which, if any, of the following households are *spiritually* on par with families consisting of married heterosexuals and their biological children:

- cohabiting heterosexual couples living with children
- single mothers who have children outside of marriage
- divorced, single-parent households
- married heterosexuals who remain childless
- same-sex couples, with or without children
- step-families

As one thinks about this question, consider that nearly all same-sex couples living in the deep South told one group of researchers that they viewed their own union as having divine significance and meaning. Similarly, heterosexual couples from this region who entered into a covenant marriage believed their highly traditional male/female spousal roles were a service to God.

Despite growing diversity of families in America, the bulk of research on religion

and family structure addresses how religious involvement promotes the formation of heterosexual marriages and traditional parent-child ties. Thus, the possibility that certain religious beliefs or practices might motivate people to form nontraditional familial ties (e.g., moving in with a “soul mate” or being a “big brother” to a foster child) remains virtually unstudied. With this in mind, let me turn to research findings about the role that religion has been found to play in creating marital and parent-child relationships.

Getting Married

As popular Internet dating sites seem to know, recent studies show that contemporary young Americans continue to use religious similarity as an important factor in screening prospective mates. In national surveys, men and women express similar wishes for their potential partners to share their religious tradition (e.g., none, Catholic, Protestant). Couples also decide early in their matchmaking process to what extent religious compatibility matters. Thus, the percentage of couples who have the same religious affiliation does not change across the stages of dating, being sexually intimate, cohabiting, or marrying.

When it comes to marrying, research shows that conservative Protestants, Catholics, Latter-day Saints, and Jews are the most likely to wed partners from their tradition (50% to 65%). Also, emerging adults who view religion as more important to their daily life and attend religious services frequently are less likely to cohabit with a partner before, or instead of, getting married. Similarly, emerging adults from all denominations who see religion as highly important are most likely to get married in their early 20s. Higher religious attendance also increases the odds that unmarried, pregnant women will marry after giving birth. Analogously, gays and lesbians who view religion as important more often engage in ritualized commitment ceremonies with same-sex partners. In general, the decision to exchange sacred vows with another person depends on the centrality of faith to one’s life, rather than affiliation with a major religious group.

Becoming a Mother

Virtually all religions encourage married couples to procreate, and this message

continues to sway young women. Women who view religion as important to their lives, for example, are more likely to give birth after age 24. By contrast, women who say religion is unimportant are more likely to have unplanned births, especially during adolescence, or to remain childless into middle age. In short, when religion is important to women from any faith, they make efforts to have motherhood happen within marriage. Young women's *intention* to have children is also tied to greater importance of religion in their lives, not how often they attend services or their specific tradition. This finding applies to women who hold liberal as well as conservative social attitudes about feminism and family life. Overall, young women who personally value religion are more likely to have children and want to be mothers.

Becoming a Father

Unlike the considerable research on women, social scientists know next to nothing about religion's role in men fathering or desiring biological children. Researchers have repeatedly examined whether fathers who are conservative Protestants invest more time in forming a relationship with their children after they are born, rather than being distant or absent. No consistent links exist between being a conservative Protestant and the amount of time that recent generations of married fathers spend with their children. Also, unmarried fathers living in low-income, urban centers of the United States are more likely to avoid offspring born out of wedlock if they are conservative Protestants, perhaps because fatherhood outside of marriage violates religious expectations. By contrast, across religious denominations, fathers who attend religious services more often also spend more time playing with their children. This suggests that greater involvement in any organized religion generally fosters the formation of father-child relationships. It is less clear whether this is because of specific religious beliefs that men hold about fatherhood or because men gain social support for this role from their religious communities.

Juggling Gender Roles at Home and Work

Emerging-adult couples face hard choices in juggling who does what in and out of the home. Many cannot afford for either spouse to be a full-time homemaker, and most wives are employed before and after having children. For devout emerging-adult

couples, this can trigger consternation. Nationally speaking, however, people within conservative Protestant or Muslim communities hold diverse opinions about how couples should divide the roles of breadwinner and homemaker. Many believers hold far more flexible attitudes about equality between spouses than the stance that husbands merit divinely sanctioned dominance over wives. In recent decades, some conservative Protestant religious leaders have begun to urge husbands either to devote more time to their “manly” segregated household tasks or to pull more weight across the board. Neither message has hit home, however, in terms of what husbands actually do. Conservative Protestant wives report doing more of both traditional “female” and “male” housework than other wives, while conservative Protestant husbands report the same (modest) effort as other husbands on both types of housework.

The foregoing does not, however, mean that religious progressive couples are more egalitarian in their marital decision making. On the whole, conservative Protestant couples are just as likely as other couples to share decisions about financial matters, child rearing, and who should work outside the home. Thus, while conservative Protestant couples say they believe more in traditional gender roles than mainline Protestant couples, the actions of both groups are in fact similar. Similarly, contemporary couples display no discernible differences in their time commitments to work versus family due to their religious affiliation; conservative Protestant couples are no more or no less likely to prioritize time for family than other couples. It remains unclear, then, to what extent religion can assist emerging-adult couples in combating financial pressures, careerism, or materialism in order to put family first.

Sustaining Family Relationships

Despite deep theological divisions within and across religious denominations about the type of family structures that should be formed, most faith traditions encourage similar virtues (e.g., love, self-sacrifice, and commitment) to facilitate the stability and health of family bonds. Indeed, researchers are beginning to uncover specific religious beliefs and practices that could help emerging adults sustain the traditional or nontraditional family relationships they do create.

Enhancing Marital Quality

Over the past 30 years, slightly higher marital satisfaction has been tied to going to religious services frequently and belonging to a religious tradition (e.g., Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish versus none). Similarity of husband and wife on religious attendance and affiliation also slightly boosts marital satisfaction. Newer research offers insights into three specific and robust ways that religion enhances marital dynamics. First, persons can pray privately for the well-being of their romantic partner. Such activity predicts greater satisfaction with a relationship over time as well as selfless concern, gratitude, and forgiveness of partners. Second, spouses often view their marriages as having divine significance, either by viewing the union as having sacred qualities (e.g., believing it is sacred or is part of a larger spiritual plan) or being a manifestation of God (e.g., God plays a role in the union or the union reflects God's will). Several studies show that greater belief in the sanctity of one's marriage predicts more marital love, satisfaction, and positive communication processes. Equally important, such links are not just the result of other positive elements of the marriage or of the spouses' overall religious involvement. Third, couples can engage in religious activities together (e.g., joint prayer or spiritual dialogues). Such activity correlates with higher satisfaction and better communication skills. We also know that college students and mothers who mutually discuss their spiritual journeys tend to have more harmonious relationships and resolve conflict collaboratively. Couples who deeply disagree in their interpretation of the Bible, however, experience more conflict. And some family dyads draw God into their conflicts as a third party. On the one hand, married couples who do this say it helps them to resolve conflict by encouraging mutual self-reflection, patience, empathy, and accountability. On the other hand, attempting to team up with God to help win arguments with a partner can escalate distance and conflict between family members.

Decreasing the Risk of Domestic Violence and Sexual Infidelity

Sensationalistic stories in the media about relatively rare instances of religion fueling domestic violence can create an impression that religion feeds such behavior. In fact, the opposite is true. According to multiple studies, persons who frequently attend religious

services are much less likely than those who attend infrequently to perpetrate or to be the victim of domestic violence in marital, cohabiting, or dating relationships. Further, contrary to stereotypes, being a conservative Protestant, biblically conservative, or in an interfaith marriage does not increase these risks. The only documented situation where religion systematically increases the odds of domestic violence is in the proportionately few marriages (7.5%) in which couples strongly disagree about the Bible. Here, biblically conservative men married to more liberal wives are more likely to be aggressive than men married to women with similar biblical views.

When it comes to infidelity, Mel Gibson and Governor Sanford are the exceptions rather than rule. People who attend religious services often are less likely to engage in extramarital affairs. But caveats do apply. The odds of infidelity paradoxically increase for people who often attend services yet do not feel close to God and for people who infrequently attend services yet do feel close to God. Also, purely private religious experiences (e.g., prayer) are unrelated to the chances a person will have an affair. Thus, sexual fidelity depends upon both people internalizing spiritual beliefs about fidelity and seeking communal support to fulfill such values. Recent research also shows that the more newlyweds view sexuality within their marriage as sacred or as connected to God, the better their sex life is over time. This suggests that certain spiritual beliefs can enrich couples' sexual lives, not merely discourage infidelity.

Risk of Child Physical Abuse

Contrary to conventional wisdom, frequent religious attendance by parents substantially decreases, rather than increases, their risk of being physically abusive to their children over time. Despite widespread worries that religiously conservative parents justify child physical abuse on religious grounds, this question has not been studied directly. The closest study reports that the odds that college students would be abusive to hypothetical children was not influenced by their religious tradition, attendance, or orthodoxy, or by the centrality of religion to their daily life. Only those who used religion for self-centered purposes were at greater risk. In short, emerging adults who take their faith seriously appear to be less likely to be physically abusive to their children than those who do not.

Disciplining and Nurturing Children

Consistent with conventional wisdom, parents who belong to conservative Protestant groups or have literalistic views of the Bible do tend to spank children more than other parents. One study found this was particularly true if parents strongly believe that parenting is a spiritual calling. In contrast, biblically liberal parents who strongly view parenting as a spiritual endeavor are less likely to spank. It does not follow, however, that conservative Protestant parents are excessively harsh. Indeed, they report yelling less and being more physically affectionate with their children than other parents. Further, in one in-depth study, conservative Protestant parents were no more likely to spank their preschoolers when stressed than other parents and just as willing to use nonpunitive discipline strategies. Conservative Protestant fathers also say they give their children more affection and supervision than other fathers. Taken together, conservative Protestant parents appear, on average, to blend firmness and warmth in child rearing in a manner consistent with their religious views of parenting and with the broad acceptance of spanking in American culture; national surveys find that most preschoolers (around 85%) and school-aged children (up to 50%) are spanked by a parent at least once per year.

Of course, little is known about the ways religion promotes parenting among the 70% to 75% of Americans who are not conservative Protestants. Clues here come from small-scale studies of young, single mothers with limited financial resources. Under these circumstances, higher religious attendance and personal importance of God or spirituality is correlated with positive parenting. This includes more satisfaction, self-confidence, authoritativeness, and consistency in parenting as well as less parental distress. This implies that emerging adults across faith traditions could turn to religion in healthy ways to help them cope with parenting challenges.

Coping with Family Problems

So far, I have covered evidence suggesting that religious individuals tend to seek out and enjoy harmonious family relationships. Paradoxically, they may therefore be ill-equipped to handle family problems that violate their religious expectations of how to form and sustain family bonds. Examples include infertility, out-of-wedlock birth,

infidelity, domestic violence, or serious dysfunction in marital or parent-child relationships. These situations may trigger spiritual struggles that create or intensify personal and relationship distress. Alternatively, spirituality may be a wellspring of resilience in times of family trouble. In general, however, very little research exists on religiously centered efforts to cope with stressful family situations that are helpful or harmful. Recent research on divorce illustrates both types of roles.

Coping with Divorce

Americans (particularly white women) who often attend religious services and couples who are religiously similar are less likely to divorce at some point in the future than others. Nevertheless, approximately 28% of Catholics, 34% of Protestants, and 33% of born-again Christians have had a prior divorce, compared to 33% of all adults. Note, these figures are based on a snapshot of a 2006 national sample, not the eventual likelihood of a divorce over time, about 46% overall in 2008. Thus, religion lowers the risk of a future divorce but does not render immunity against divorce. This raises important questions about spiritually centered coping and postdivorce adjustment. Initial research on this topic found that divorcing adults as well as college students with divorced parents often interpreted this event as the loss or violation of something sacred and experienced spiritual struggles about it. Such spiritual distress exacerbates emotional distress. On the other hand, divorcing adults who turn to God and a spiritual community for support are less depressed over time. The picture is less clear for parental divorce. Emerging adults who recalled trying to use such spiritual resources at the time of the divorce reported higher current maladjustment. National surveys also show that when parents divorce, their children are likely to switch denominations or disengage from organized religion. Thus, the experience of divorce seems to often be a spiritual trauma, and this merits further scholarly attention.

Deepening Our Understanding of Prevention and Intervention

Taken as a whole, the scientific evidence indicates that religion tends to promote family formation and prevent family difficulties. Emerging adults should seek healthy ways of integrating their faith into their pursuit of family relationships, and communities of faith should not be silent about their faith's contribution to relational well-being. At the

same time, social scientists need to investigate further religious factors that can help or harm family relationships, especially during times of family trouble, and partner with diverse communities of faith to help individuals prevent family distress and intervene effectively when family crises do occur. Faith and spirituality possess unique resources that can positively address the special challenges of contemporary marriage and parenting, in ways that scientists and ministry practitioners alike have only begun to understand.

Selected Resources for Further Information

Butler, M. H., and Harper, J. M. (1994). The divine triangle: God in the marital system of religious couples. *Family Process, 33*, 277–286.

This insightful article would be of great interest to pastoral counselors, marital and family therapists, and lay people. In it, the authors use family therapy concepts (based on Bowenian or structural family systems approaches) to show how couples may triangulate God into the marital system when conflict emerges. They give case examples to illustrate how God could be drawn into three types of counterproductive spiritual triangles that block resolution of conflict between family dyads: coalition (e.g., one or both partners act as if God is on his or her side in a conflict), displacement (e.g., one or both partners view their relationship problems as being God's fault), or substitutive (i.e., one or both partners seek out God's support for relationship difficulties and avoids dealing directly with problems in the relationship).

Edgell, P. (2005). *Religion and family in a changing society*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

In this book, sociologist Penny Edgell discusses ways that religious congregations in America have tried to cope with the rapid changes that have occurred in family structure in the past 40 years and how families participate in local religious

communities. She conducted an in-depth study of congregations and community residents in upstate New York that included surveys, interviews, examination of religious communities' materials written for lay people (e.g., bulletins), and direct observation of the communities. Based on this information as well as other social science studies, Edgell says that while some religious groups may be nostalgic for the Ozzie and Harriet days, others are changing, recognizing that fewer and fewer families fit this traditional pattern. To keep members with nontraditional family arrangements within the congregation, innovative communities have emphasized individual freedom and personal spirituality and actively welcomed single adults and those from nontraditional families.

Another interesting point that Edgell discusses is that mothers and fathers appear to seek involvement in congregations for different reasons. Men tend to think of congregations as social support structures and to get involved as a means of participating in the lives of their children. Women, by contrast, are more often motivated by the quest for religious experience and can adapt more readily to pluralist ideas about family structure. This, Edgell concludes, may explain the attraction of men to more conservative congregations and women to nontraditional religious groups.

Overall, this is a thought-provoking and balanced analysis of ways that religious organizations are attempting to cope with contemporary family structures. The book won the 2006 Distinguished Book Award, Section on Sociology of Religion, American Sociological Association.

Fincham, F. D., Beach, S. R. H., Lambert, N. M., Stillman, T., and Braithwaite, S. (2008). Spiritual behaviors and relationship satisfaction: A critical analysis of the role of prayer. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 27*, 362–388.

This journal article includes three studies that examine the effects of young adults praying for the well-being of a romantic partner on their relationship. In Study 1, the authors find that benevolent prayer for the partner predicted later relationship satisfaction, but relationship satisfaction did not predict prayer over time. This suggests that prayer improves relationship satisfaction, rather than vice versa. In

Study 2, the authors show that prayer for a partner's well-being is what makes a difference, not just overall amount of general praying. They also show that prayer for the partner makes a difference in relationship satisfaction, even after taking into account other types of positive and negative behaviors in the relationship. Finally, in Study 3, the authors find that a key ingredient that seems to make praying for a partner's well-being helpful is that this kind of prayer draws the attention of the person praying to the longer-term well-being of the relationship, rather than short-term goals of getting one's own needs met.

Gallagher, S. K. (2003). *Evangelical identity and gendered family life*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

This excellent, highly accessible book would be of interest to anyone curious about how contemporary young evangelical families try to integrate religion and spirituality into their family relationships on a day-to-day basis. The author reports findings based on a national survey and personal interviews with over 300 evangelical families. She includes engaging stories, examples, and quotes to bring the material alive. She particularly pays attention to how husbands and wives approach the issue of egalitarianism within the spousal relationship. She discusses the history and current practices for a model in which husbands have religiously based authority and leadership in the home versus a model in which husbands and wives create a balanced partnership. She offers rich accounts of how couples deal with the demands of sharing parenting and homemaking tasks within the home and of balancing career and family demands.

Mahoney, A. (in press). *Religion in families, 1999 to 2009: A relational spirituality perspective*. *Journal of Marriage and Family*.

This article (which provided the scholarly foundation for this essay) summarizes scientific findings on religion/spirituality and marital or parent-child relationships based on empirical studies that were published in peer-reviewed journal articles from 1999 through 2009. Readers interested in learning more about research from 1999 through 2009 or who would like background material for conducting future

research studies would benefit from reading the article.

Mahoney, A., Pargament, K. I., Murray-Swank, A., and Murray-Swank, N. (2003). Religion and the sanctification of family relationships. *Review of Religious Research*, 40, 220–236.

This article explains and gives examples of how social scientists can study ways that people can perceive marriage and parenting as being sacred. The term *sanctification* is used in the article to label this process. This authors define and treat sanctification as a psychological process in which aspects of life are perceived as having spiritual character and significance. The article discusses how the construct of sanctification applies to marital and parent-child relationships as well as to the entire family system according to diverse religious traditions. The authors list specific questions used to assess sanctification and explain ways that sanctification can be positive for family life. The article also highlights the potential harm that may result from the sanctification of family relationships and discusses circumstances that may present particular risks (unavoidable challenges, violations by family members, loss, conflict, and intrapsychic and institutional barriers).

Mahoney, A., and Tarakeshwar, N. (2005). Religion's role in marriage and parenting in daily life and during family crises. In R. F. Paloutzian and C. L. Park (Eds.), *Handbook of the psychology of religion and spirituality* (pp. 177–198). New York: Guilford Press.

This chapter provides an accessible summary of scientific findings on religion/spirituality and marital or parent-child relationships based on empirical studies that were published in peer-reviewed journal articles from 1980 through 1999. Readers interested in learning more about research from 1980 through 1999 or who would like background material for conducting future research studies would benefit from this article.

Mahoney, A., Krumrei, E. J., and Pargament, K. I. (2008). Broken vows: Divorce as a spiritual trauma and its implications for growth and decline. In S. Joseph and P. Alex Linley (Eds.), *Trauma, recovery, and growth: Positive psychological perspectives on*

posttraumatic stress (pp. 105–124). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

This chapter explains and presents case examples from a research study on how a divorce can be experienced as a spiritual trauma. The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section talks about how people may interpret a divorce as the loss or violation of a marriage that was once viewed as sacred. Such interpretations are tied to more emotional and spiritual distress. The second section talks about ways that people may experience a variety of spiritual struggles in coping with a divorce and how this may intensify psychological distress and conflict with the ex-spouse. The third section talks about ways that people can draw on spiritual resources to cope effectively with a divorce, including when it is experienced as a loss or violation of sacred vows. This chapter could help lay people, pastor counselors, and mental health professionals explore the spiritual dimensions of divorce and thereby facilitate growth and recovery after a divorce.

Onedera, J. D. (Ed.) (2008). *The role of religion in marriage and family counseling*. New York: Routledge.

This is a rare book that attempts to summarize for mental health professionals what different religious traditions teach about religious/spiritual beliefs and practices that pertain to family life. This book provides practitioners with an overview of the principles of the major world religions, with a focus on how each religion can influence family dynamics and how best to incorporate this knowledge into effective practice with clients.

Most chapters follow a format in which the author, writing from his or her specific religious background, covers the following topics: definitions of marriage; roles within marriages and families; child bearing; birth control; abortion; teenage pregnancy; finances; dissolving relationships, divorce, and annulment; managing the family after separation or divorce; death and dying; and homosexuality in couples and families in that religion.

Pargament, K. I. (1997). *The psychology of religion and coping: Theory, research, practice*. New York: Guilford Press.

This is a classic and comprehensive text on the psychology of religion and coping. It is a must-read for anyone interested in ways religion may come into play, for better and worse, when individuals encounter a wide variety of stressful life events. The book includes many examples, yet covers material in a sophisticated and complex manner. It addresses the commonplace phrase “there are no atheists in foxholes” by revealing the many ways religion can be a help or a hindrance during times of trouble. The author masterfully weaves together key concepts with first-hand accounts, insights from clinical practice, and empirical research.

Pargament, K. I. (2007). *Spiritually integrated psychotherapy: Understanding and addressing the sacred*. New York: Guilford Press.

A growing number of books are being written about how to address spiritual matters in the process of providing psychotherapy to clients. This book is one of the best, written by a leading researcher and scholar. It would especially be useful to pastoral counselors and religious leaders who provide counseling. The book provides a systematic and thoughtful way of understanding how religious/spiritual beliefs and practices can provide unique and rich sets of resources to transform one’s life. With equal coverage, the book discusses how religious/spiritual beliefs and practices can be part of the problem or make it worse. The innovative framework is written from a nonsectarian perspective and covers both traditional and nontraditional forms of spirituality. It offers concrete ideas and practices for discussing spiritual matters with clients, assessing spirituality as part of their problems and solutions, and drawing on spiritual resources to resolve distress. Highly recommended!

Walsh, Froma (Ed.). (2008). *Spiritual resources in family therapy*. 2nd ed. New York: Guilford Press.

This edited book includes 14 chapters written by different family therapists about various ways that they address spirituality in individual and family therapy work. The editor also offers two introductory chapters on the interface between spirituality and family therapy. The book presents a broad and pluralistic view of spirituality and offers an ecumenical wellspring for therapists and clients of diverse faith

orientations. Many different traditions are represented, with an emphasis on ways spirituality can be a resource to facilitate change and growth. The book should be of interest to pastoral counselors, mental health professional, family therapists, and other health professionals.

Yust, K. M. (2004). *Real kids, real faith: Practices for nurturing children's spiritual lives*. San Francisco: Wiley.

This book is an excellent resource for parents who want concrete ideas for how to facilitate their children's spiritual lives. The author is a pastor, teacher, mother, and well-respected theologian. The material is drawn from a three-part study of children's spirituality as well as practices and literature found in diverse religious traditions. The author covers core universal principles and provides parents with specific lists of resources from different traditions (e.g., children's books, religious reading materials for different age groups, various religious rituals). The writing style is highly engaging and practical. The author suggests that parents should treat their children as being capable of asking important spiritual questions and help them build a firm foundation for their spiritual development. In short, the book combats the notion that children should be left on their own to discover a spiritual identity and provides valuable guidelines for how parents can foster their children's spiritual development.