Spiritsuality is a powerful dimension of human experience and family life. Spiritual beliefs and practices have anchored and nourished families over the millennia and across cultures. Today, the vast majority of families worldwide adopt some form of expression for their spiritual needs, both within and outside organized religion. This chapter addresses the role of spirituality in couple and family relationships, with attention to the growing diversity and complexity of spiritual beliefs and practices in society and within families. It examines the meaning and salience of spirituality in sociocultural context and its dynamic ebb and flow across the multigenerational family life cycle. Research and practice recommendations are offered to explore the spiritual dimension in couple and family relationships: to identify spiritual sources of distress and spiritual resources for coping, healing, and resilience, fitting families’ values and preferences.

SPIRITUALITY: A DIMENSION OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE

To consider the role of spirituality in contemporary family life, it is important to clarify the concepts of religion and spirituality (Hill & Pargament, 2003). They are often blurred, mistakenly polarized, or conflated in research and public surveys.¹

Religion can be defined as an organized, institutionalized faith system, with shared traditions, doctrine, practices, and a community of followers. Through sacred scriptures and teachings, religions provide standards and prescriptions for personal virtue, relational conduct, and family life. Congregational affiliation provides clergy guidance and a community of shared faith,
providing support in times of need. Rituals and ceremonies carry profound significance, connecting families with their larger community, its history, and its survival over adversity. Religious belief systems provide faith explanations of major events, personal experiences, and passage to an afterlife.

*Spirituality*, a broad overarching construct, refers to transcendent beliefs and practices lived out in daily life and relationships. Spirituality is “the heart and soul” of religion (Pargament, 2007) and can also be experienced outside religious structures through active investment in personal faith and in humanistic values by those who are not religious.

Spirituality can best be seen as a dimension of human experience. As such, it requires an expansion of systems theory, research, and practice to encompass biopsychosocial–spiritual influences and their interplay in personal and relational well-being and in suffering, healing, and resilience (Marks, 2005). Like culture or ethnicity, spirituality involves streams of experience that flow through all aspects of life, from multigenerational heritage to shared belief systems and their expression in ongoing transactions, spiritual practices, and responses to adversity. It ebbs and surges in significance over the life course. With neurobiological linkages, it involves the most profound and genuine connection within the self, thought of as one’s inner spirit, center of being, or soul. It includes ethical values and a moral compass, expanding consciousness to responsibility for and beyond oneself, with awareness of our interdependence. Thus, spirituality transcends the self: It fosters a sense of meaning, wholeness, harmony, and connection with all others—from the most intimate bonds to extended kinship and community networks, and to a unity with all life, nature, and the universe. This perspective is at the core of spiritual belief systems of ancient indigenous peoples worldwide, as in Asian, African, Aboriginal, and Native American visions of the unity of all creation.

Spiritual nourishment can be found in varied ways, whether through religion or not. Many who are not affiliated with faith communities, and who may not consider themselves “religious,” lead deeply spiritual lives. Personal faith may (or may not) involve a belief in a supreme being, a divine spirit within all living things, or a striving toward an ultimate human condition. Even among atheists and agnostics, most hold a transcendent set of values, such as secular humanism, that guides actions and relationships. Spiritual resources might include contemplative practices, such as prayer or meditation, and traditional healing rituals. Renewal and connection are found through nature and expression in the arts. Meaning and purpose are found in compassionate service to those in need and in social action to right injustice and to repair and improve conditions in our world. Spirituality is inherently relational and finds its most immediate expression in couple and family bonds.

**Spiritual Diversity in a Changing Society**

As families have become more diverse and complex over recent decades, so too have their approaches to their spiritual life. The patterns described here
primarily reflect developments in the United States, yet similar changes are occurring in many societies. A broad multifaith and multidimensional perspective can have useful practice applications across cultures.

Religion has been central in family life throughout American history. In recent surveys, over 85% of all Americans report that religion is important in their lives; over half regard it as very important, and nearly one-third consider it the most important part of their lives (Gallup, Inc., 2008). By contrast, most northern Europeans and Australians are far more secular; among the British, only 17% take religion very seriously. Both the United States and Canada, which have been overwhelmingly Christian and Protestant until recent decades, are increasingly diverse in spiritual beliefs and practices.

The religious landscape in North America has been changing dramatically over recent decades, largely through immigration and the desire to seek varied spiritual pathways (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2008; 2009). Currently over 75% of Americans identify as Christian (Gallup, Inc., 2008). Denominational affiliations have been shifting from Roman Catholic (now 23%) and mainline Protestant (under 14%) to evangelical churches, many nondenominational (Lindner, 2008). Over 40% of Christians (3 in 10 Americans) now identify as evangelical, “born again,” or fundamentalist, which are overlapping groups (Gallup, Inc., 2008; Greeley & Hout, 2006). Mormons (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints), nearing 2% of all adults, are the fastest growing religious group.

Non-Christians have steadily increased to over 15% of the population (Smith, 2002). Close to 2% identify as Jewish, yet vary widely from Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform branches to secular humanism and ethnic connection (Kadushin, Phillips, & Saxe, 2005). Buddhists, Muslims, and Hindus, approaching 1% each, are increasing. Others follow ancient traditions such as Native American, Sikh, Shinto, and Tao. Some are drawn to religions offering a universality of faiths, such as Unitarian/Universalist and Baha’i, which avows “many lamps; one light.”

Formal denominational affiliation, congregational membership, and attendance at worship services have been declining (Lindner, 2008; Pew Forum, 2008). Currently, 62% of adults belong to a church or synagogue, yet only 38% attend services weekly (mostly older women); 27% seldom or never attend. Still, there are over 500,000 churches, temples, mosques, and other places of worship—from small storefronts to megachurches—drawing tens of thousands of congregants.

**Common Religious Beliefs**

The vast majority of Americans believe in God, a Higher Power, or a Universal spirit. Only 6% are atheists and 8% are agnostic, uncertain about the existence of God (Gallup, Inc., 2008). Conceptions of God vary widely, from a “force” that maintains a balance in nature to a personal God, who watches over and judges people, guiding them in making decisions. The closer believers
feel to God, the better they feel about themselves and others. Most people say their religious beliefs help them to solve problems, to respect themselves and others, to help those in need, and keep them from doing things they know they should not do. Most believe in virtue and sin, to be rewarded or punished in an afterlife, according to varied conceptions of heaven and hell or reincarnation.

Most people’s faith is stronger than their knowledge of their religion. Although over 90% of homes contain a Bible, 58% of Americans could not name five of the Ten Commandments; moreover, 10% thought Joan of Arc was Noah’s wife. Nearly half of all teens thought Moses was one of the 12 Apostles (Prothero, 2007)!

**Intertwining of Cultural and Spiritual Influences**

Spiritual beliefs and practices are interwoven with sociocultural influences and vary greatly across and within ethnic groups. In the United States, African Americans are the most religious group, from personal faith to active congregational participation (Gallup & Lindsay, 2000). Some are involved in historically black churches that have been vital resources since the time of slavery. All look to their faith for strength in dealing with adversity (Boyd-Franklin & Lockwood, 2009; see Boyd-Franklin & Karger, Chapter 12, this volume).

Latino families, fervent in their prayer and congregational involvement, are increasingly reshaping the Catholic church and are turning to evangelical Christian churches, particularly Pentecostal and Charismatic spirit-filled movements, for more direct experience of God (Pew Hispanic Project, 2007). For the great majority of Latinos, God is an active force in everyday life. Many report experiences of direct revelations and divine healing and miracles; contact with deceased loved ones; and transpersonal encounters with angels, demons, and other spiritual visitations.

Immigrants from Latin America, Asia, and Africa often combine traditional spiritual beliefs and practices, such as espiritismo, with Christianity (Falicov, 2009). Most turn to the church for weddings, christenings, and funerals, yet may also maintain special relationships with spiritual guides or shamans and continue ancient practices and rituals. Many believe in an invisible world inhabited by good and evil spirits that influence human behavior: they can protect or harm, prevent or cause illness, and bring good luck or misfortune (Pew, 2009). Incense, candles, objects, herbal remedies, and powders with mystical properties are used to cure illness and ward off the “evil eye.” Many believe that they can communicate directly with the spirits of ancestors who, if honored appropriately, will confer their blessings and protect them.

Eastern medicine and indigenous healing approaches are often turned to for physical and emotional distress alongside Western medicine and psychotherapy, but patients may not mention them if not asked. In therapy with refugee youth from Sudan, Kamya (2009) found that crucial in their trauma
recovery and resilience were both their Christian faith in God and their prayers to ancestors and animist powers in nature and the spirit world (Mbiti, 1970). It is important for clinicians to respectfully explore these beliefs and practices. Too often, they have been neglected, depreciated, or pathologized in Western clinical settings.

Spiritual approaches in families also vary with generational cohorts, social class, education, and urban or rural setting. Religious, cultural, or racial discrimination in the larger society can lead family members to band together in solidarity, suppress identification, or marry out to assimilate. Families in impoverished communities find strength through their faith and congregational involvement to counter despair at blighted conditions and injustices. Aponte (2009) contends that those who have become dispirited, losing hope and faith in their chances for a better life, suffer at the core a wounding of the soul, with a pervasive sense of helplessness and rage. He urges therapists to attend to spiritual as well as practical needs to help marginalized youth and their families find meaning, purpose, and connection in their lives.

It is crucial to guard against stereotypes and not link religion and ethnicity reflexively. For instance, only one-third of Arab Americans are Muslim—most are Christian. Over half of American Muslims are not Arab; many are African American, and others have come from diverse ethnic groups around the world (Daneshpour, 1998). Most Muslim American immigrants are largely assimilated, moderate in their political views, and happy with their lives, yet they face strong discrimination (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2007).

In a predominantly Christian society with European origins, scholars and clinicians must be mindful not to superimpose that template of values on other belief systems and practices. It is crucial not to judge diverse faith orientations, particularly those of ancient and indigenous cultures, as inferior or primitive. Religious intolerance, persecution, and holy wars to convert or annihilate nonbelievers have had catastrophic consequences throughout human times (Marty, 2005). Early European American conquerors viewed Native tribes as savage heathens who practiced pagan witchcraft. In government and missionary programs, children were forcibly taken from their families to boarding schools to educate and acculturate them in Christianity and Western ways, stripping them of their cultural and spiritual heritage. A recent resurgence of Native American spirituality is reconnecting families and youth, especially those at high risk of substance abuse and suicide, with the spiritual roots of their ancestors (Bucko, 2007; Deloria, 1994).

**Increasing Independence and Blending in Spiritual Life**

In recent decades, as global crises, societal dislocations, and family structural transformations have rendered life less secure and more challenging, families are seeking greater coherence, meaning, and connectedness in their lives. Many turn to their cherished traditions, yet increasingly others forge
new spiritual paths. As families’ relationship patterns and trajectories over a lengthening life course become more varied and complex, so too are their approaches to religion and spirituality. In our rapidly changing society, religion is less often a given that people are born into and accept unquestioningly. Strikingly, 44% do not follow the religion of their upbringing in their families of origin (Lindner, 2008).

Recent surveys (e.g., Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2008, 2009) reveal that people are increasingly independent in their spiritual lives, picking and choosing among aspects of their faith to fit their lives and relationships, a trend called “religion à la carte” by Canadian sociologist Bibby (2002). Many blend varied approaches, such as Eastern Buddhist and Hindu practices, with their Christian or Jewish faith. Others convert to other religions or nondenominational churches, searching new spiritual pathways. While 16% of adults are unaffiliated with any religion, most who are unaffiliated regard personal faith or a broader spirituality as important in their lives. Interfaith marriage and multifaith families are on the rise. Although survey data tend to be individually focused, these trends bring complexity to family dynamics. As individuals and couples attempt to shape their own meaningful spiritual paths, relational and intergenerational differences can fuel tensions, conflict, and estrangement (Walsh, 2010).

Public attitudes across social issues such as gay marriage, gay adoption and parenting, abortion, and euthanasia, have been moderating, with growing acceptance (Pew Forum, 2008). The most conservative on these issues tend to be evangelical Protestants, older adults, and those less educated. Yet we must be cautious not to assume that particular individuals or their loved ones adhere to doctrines of their religion. Those who have a friend or family member who is gay are twice as likely to be supportive of gay rights. On reproductive rights, across the ideological spectrum, two-thirds support finding common ground, for example, making abortion available but rare. Among Catholics, over 60% believe that those who have abortions can still be good Catholics. Over 75% of Catholics disagree with the Church refusal to sanction divorce and remarriage (Gallup & Lindsay, 2000). There is a growing gap between personal faith and adherence to institutionalized religious systems. Most people regard decisions such as birth control, abortion, divorce, and assisted-dying as a matter between them, their loved ones, and God. In summary, most Americans are highly independent in their spiritual lives (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2008). Still, such issues can cause contention in couple and family relationships.

### SPIRITUAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES IN FAMILY LIFE

Spirituality is deeply interwoven in most aspects of family life, yet research is only starting to clarify its influences. A growing body of research has been examining the influences of spiritual beliefs, practices, and congregational involvement on family functioning, parenting styles, family dynamics, and
intergenerational bonds (e.g., Bailey, 2002; Dollahite & Marks, 2009; Lambert & Dollahite, 2006; Mahoney, 2005; Mahoney & Tarakeshwar, 2005; Marks, 2006; Snarey & Dollahite, 2001; Snider, Clements, & Vazsonyi, 2004; see Mahoney, 2010, for a critical review). Researchers who study highly religious families are examining the role of religion in couple conflict (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006; Marsh & Dallos, 2001) and parent–child interactions (Marks, 2004).

The preponderance of research has focused on couple relationships. Family research to date is limited: Studies tend to be cross-sectional, not permitting causal associations; to be conducted predominantly with highly religious, white Christian families; to be based on self-report of one family member; and to use only one or two items to measure religious variables (e.g., affiliation, attendance, self-rated importance, and Biblical conservatism; Mahoney, 2010). Overall, studies suggest positive benefits of religion in family functioning, child development, and the quality and stability of relationships. More in-depth research is needed to better illuminate the beliefs and practices that help or hinder family members and their relationships.

Public surveys find that those who regard religion as the most important influence in their lives and receive a great deal of comfort from their faith are far more likely to feel close to their families, to find their jobs fulfilling, and to be hopeful about the future (Gallup & Lindsay, 2000). Over 80% say that religion was important in their family of origin when they were growing up. Although many do not follow the faith of their upbringing, nearly 75% report that their current family relationships have been strengthened by religion in their home.

**Shared Transcendent Values**

Family process research has found that transcendent values foster healthy family functioning (Beavers & Hampson, 2003): A shared belief system that transcends the limits of family members’ experience enables better acceptance of the inevitable risks and losses in living and loving fully. Members can view their particular life challenges, however painful and uncertain, from a larger perspective that makes some sense of events, fosters hope, and strengthens their bonds and common humanity with others.

Family values became a hotly debated issue in recent decades as religious conservatives contended that nontraditional family forms and gender roles would destroy the family and damage children. There is growing recognition that faith institutions need to adapt to the diversity of contemporary family life (Edgell, 2005). Holding a single, outdated family model as the “paragon of virtue” contributes spiritual distress to stigma already experienced by single parents, same-sex parents, and others. Abundant research finds that most children thrive when raised in a variety of kinship arrangements and by gay as well as straight parents (see Walsh, Chapter 1, and Part II chapters, this volume).
The vast majority of families raise their children with strong moral and spiritual values in stable, caring, and committed bonds. Most uphold traditional values of commitment, responsibility, and investment in raising healthy children. Morality in their family life involves the activity of informed conscience orienting relationships and judging right or wrong, based on principles of fairness, decency, generosity, and compassion (Anderson, 2009; Doherty, 2009). Most value a spiritual dimension in their lives that fosters personal and relational well-being, positive growth, and concern for others. Most are giving and forgiving in their personal relationships. Of note, survey respondents (Gallup & Lindsay, 2000) have ranked “family ties, loyalty, and traditions” as the main factors thought to strengthen the family; next were “moral and spiritual values,” which far outranked “family counseling” and “parent training classes.”

**The Dynamic Nature of Spirituality Over the Family Life Cycle**

Spirituality is at the heart of our earliest, longest-lasting, and most intimate bonds. It profoundly influences—and is affected by—both individual and family development through dynamic processes that ebb and flow, shifting in salience and meaning over the life course and across the generations (Worthington, 1989). From a systems perspective, there is a mutual influence between spirituality and the family over time: Meaningful spiritual beliefs and practices can strengthen family units, their members, and their bonds; in turn, their shared spiritual experiences strengthen members’ faith. Likewise, harsh or oppressive spiritual convictions and practices can wound family members, their spirits, and their relationships; in turn, those who have been injured often turn away from their families and their faith.

A developmental systemic orientation is required to appreciate the dynamic nature of spirituality. This perspective attends to the intertwining of individual, couple, parent–child, and extended family influences over time. Family systems are meaning-making communities with directionality and a life of their own (Anderson, 2009). Rooted in cultural, spiritual, and multi-generational traditions, each family constructs its own spirituality, which is transmitted through ongoing transactions. From the miracle of birth to the mystery of death and afterlife, spiritual matters are at the heart of family relations. Spiritual considerations arise with each family life phase and with major transitions. Critical events may heighten their saliency or spark new directions.

Across diverse faiths, believers seek wisdom in making decisions about whom and when to marry, spousal roles, and childrearing (Onedera, 2008). In all religions, the family is central in sacred rites and those that mark the birth of a new member, entry into the adult community, marriage vows, and the death of a loved one. For instance, the practice of Judaism is centered on the family observance of rituals, from weekly Shabbat (Sabbath) to important holidays, such as Passover, in the Jewish calendar year, and rites of passage.
(e.g., bat/bar mitzvah) in the life cycle. Each ritual carries significant meaning, connecting family members with their larger community and with the history of the Jewish people and their covenant with God.

Couple Relationships

Marriage and commitment vows as life partners bring spiritual considerations to the fore. Conflict may arise over whether to have a religious ceremony. Even partners of the same faith may differ in how they were raised and in their expectations for the observance of doctrine, roles, and customs in their shared life. Families of origin may exert pressures for wedding plans and future family life in line with their own convictions. This can fuel intergenerational conflict and in-law triangles that reverberate over the years.

Marital and commitment vows are inherently spiritual, whether or not they conform to religious orthodoxy, incorporating core values of love, honor, mutual respect, loyalty, and trust. Many regard the formation and maintenance of a family as integral in their search for the sacred (Mahoney, 2010). Many same-sex couples report that their union has divine significance and meaning (Rostosky, Riggle, Brodnicki, & Olson, 2008), one reason for the importance of gaining marriage rights.

For older couples, spouses who are similar in religious affiliation, beliefs, and practices report greater personal well-being and relationship satisfaction, less conflict and abuse, and lower likelihood of divorce than those who differ (Myers, 2006). Relationships are enhanced when couples share meaningful spiritual practices and rituals (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001). Strong religious commitment can support fragile marital bonds through times of conflict (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006).

Interfaith Marriage. Traditionally prohibited by many religions, interfaith marriage has become widespread. Currently, nearly 40% of Americans are married to someone outside their faith (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2008). Some may choose a spouse from a different religious background to differentiate from their family of origin. In some cases, this may express a rebellion or alienation from oppressive religious or parental upbringing. However, most often this choice is a natural outgrowth of broader social contacts in our multicultural society. Acceptance has increased with the support of interfaith movements and the blurring of racial and ethnic barriers. However, family disapproval can have long-lasting reverberations in intergenerational relations.

When partners follow separate religions, strong faith differences can complicate ordinary couple relationship issues and create discord (Curtis & Ellison, 2002). Under stress, tolerance can erode, particularly if one religious approach is upheld as right, true, or morally superior. In raising children, some couples decide to choose one faith; others attempt to combine faith approaches; still others postpone decisions to let children choose their spiritual path as
they develop. More complications arise when parents maintain different faith identities and practices, and are involved in separate faith communities. Differences that initially attracted partners or seemed unimportant can become contentious as decisions arise regarding significant rites, such as communion, baptism, or bar/bat mitzvah.

**Divorce and Remarriage.** Although religion can strengthen marital bonds, a sizable number of religiously affiliated people have been divorced, including more socially conservative Christians (Barna Group, 2008). Both divorce and remarriage can be fraught with religious complications. For Orthodox Jews, a divorced woman wishing to remarry must obtain a “get,” or written permission, from her ex-spouse, although a man is not required to do so. The Catholic Church regards marriage as a sacrament that cannot be dissolved and only sanctions remarriage in cases of annulment. Catholics who leave their marriage often leave the church. Many who wish to remarry decide instead simply to cohabit with a new partner. Some petition the church for annulment when planning remarriage. Annulments are now commonly granted, even after a long marriage and over objections of a spouse and children, who may be deeply wounded that their prior family life and legitimacy are invalidated. It is crucial to explore such conflict-laden issues in practice.

With divorce in interfaith marriages, faith differences can become entangled with relational hurts, retaliation, and control issues (Walsh, 2010). While the custodial parent has the right to determine the continuing religious upbringing of children, this can become highly contentious, especially in joint custody situations. Furthermore, the nonresident parent usually has visitation on weekends, when most religious education and worship take place.

**Parent–Child Relationships**

From earliest childhood, convictional faith is shaped within caregiving relationships. With childrearing come parental decisions about spiritual upbringing. Over time, open discussions and further decision making are needed as children mature, as faith preferences change, or as spiritual questions arise. Sometimes children draw parents back to their religious roots. Grandparents may strongly voice their faith convictions for the spiritual development of their grandchildren. Those who previously accepted their child’s nontraditional, interfaith, or same-sex commitment may shift to concern for their grandchildren. As one Christian grandmother expressed, “I thought I was OK with it all, but when I hold my grandbaby and see how precious and vulnerable she is, I worry that if something terrible happened to her, she wouldn’t go to heaven.”

Studies of highly religious families find a beneficial role of faith in parent–child interactions (Mahoney, 2010). Underscoring the importance of the “lived experience” of religion and spirituality, what matters most in childrearing is that parents practice what they preach (Marks, 2004). When parents
are congruent in transmitting and following their spiritual values in parenting their children, and when they engage in meaningful spiritual practices together, children are more likely to internalize similar beliefs and practices, to find them to be a resource, and to feel more positive about their relationships. Children and adolescents most value spiritual practices that are shared and integrated into family life, as in family prayer, special rituals and holidays, community service, and family attendance at worship services (Bartkowski, Xu, & Levin, 2008). Youth across faiths and cultures express strong interest in discussing life’s meaning and how to make moral decisions (Coles, 1997; Gallup & Lindsay, 2000), underscoring the importance of open communication and exploration of spiritual matters between parents and youth (Brelsford & Mahoney, 2008; Dollahite & Thatcher, 2008).

Limited research exists on the role of religion in vulnerable and distressed families. Studies of low-income and disproportionately single-parent minority families suggest that religion can facilitate positive parenting in stressful contexts (Mahoney, 2010). Greater religious involvement and personal salience of God or spirituality has been linked to more maternal satisfaction, efficacy, authoritativeness, and consistency, as well as less parental distress. Involvement in religious communities is a strong protective factor for at-risk adolescent single mothers and their children, with lower depression and child maltreatment, and with higher socioemotional adjustment and educational and job attainment (Carothers, Borkowski, Lefever, & Whitman, 2005). Data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Pearce & Haynie, 2004) show that when mothers and their adolescent children both consider religion important and attend religious services together, the children are less often delinquent. Here, again, religion tends to be protective through shared beliefs and practices.

Family Relations in Adulthood and Later Life

Young adults—particularly college students—often distance themselves from their religious upbringing. Some simply drift away, while others more actively question their family’s traditions. Many who are searching for greater meaning and commitment in their lives explore other spiritual pathways. Some who choose to convert or marry outside their faith may be seeking to differentiate from their family of origin or to distance from their ethnic or religious background. Parents may perceive such a choice as a rejection of themselves and all they value, which may not be the case. However, in some instances, such choices may express a rebellion against religious or parental authority that was experienced as harsh and oppressive. Such issues should be sensitively explored in clinical practice. Therapists can facilitate greater mutual understanding and acceptance of differences.

Middle to later life is a time of growing saliency of spirituality, as older adults and midlife family members increasingly face the illness and death of loved ones, and confront their own vulnerabilities and mortality. Whether
or not they are religious, most grapple with questions about the meaning of life and reflect on their own personal and relational conduct and legacies (Walsh, 2011). In later life, there is a developmental striving toward meaning, connection, and continuity within older adults’ multigenerational family system—those who came before and those who will come after them. Efforts to reconcile relational grievances (Fishbane, 2009) and gain a sense of family integrity (King & Wynne, 2004) generate a deep and abiding sense of peace and satisfaction with past, present, and future family relationships.

Facing Death and Loss

When families face end-of-life challenges, spiritual concerns can weigh heavily on life-and-death decisions (Walsh, 2009c). Now that medical advances and life support technology call into question just what is a “natural death,” families face morally anguishing dilemmas and may grapple with religious prohibitions about hastening or assisting death. Those who believe in an afterlife may also be profoundly concerned about the fate of a loved one who has sinned or left the family’s faith.

Coming to terms with death and loss involves multiple losses: the person; the spousal or family role; each unique relationship; and shattered hopes and dreams for the future (Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004). Death ends a life but not relationships, which are transformed from physical presence to ongoing spiritual connections, sustained through memory, dreams, rituals, conversations, stories, and legacies (Walsh, 2009c). Many believe that the spirits of ancestors may haunt or cause harm; however, if honored appropriately, they will confer their blessings and protection. How families handle loss can facilitate or hinder the adaptation of all members and their relationships. Spiritual beliefs, practices, and support of a faith community can facilitate coping, adaptation, and resilience (Greef & Joubert, 2007).

Continuity and Change

Across the family life cycle, spirituality in many families involves a lifelong, faithful adherence to a shared religious tradition. Yet, increasingly, spiritual expression assumes varied forms and substance as family members forge meaning and connection in life pursuits and significant relationships. Therefore, it is important to explore both continuities and changes over time, and help families respect differences and attempt to blend them.

Patriarchy and Changing Gender Role Relations

Patriarchy, an ancient and enduring cultural pattern embedded in most religious traditions, has been a dominant force in family life. At its worst, it has sanctioned—or it has been used to justify—the subjugation and abuse of women and harsh corporal punishment of children (Bottoms, Shaver,
Goodman, & Qin, 1995; Ellison & Anderson, 2001; Ellison & Broadshaw, 2009; Gunnoe, Hetherington, & Reiss, 2006; Murray-Swank, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2006). A legacy of the devaluation of females has been the abandonment, sexual trafficking, infanticide, and abortion of unwanted daughters in many parts of the world.

Within conservative religious groups, most women adhere to their deep faith convictions when they are treated with respect and valued for their centrality in family life as mothers, caregivers, and keepers of the hearth. However, when relationships are highly skewed in power, privilege, and control, men are more likely to act violently when conflict arises as women assert their needs or challenge authority (Kimball & Knudson-Martin, 2002). Some devout wives stay in abusive situations to adhere to religious precepts to keep their families intact. Increasingly, abuse of wives and children leads women to separate and divorce, which also alienate many from their religious roots. Many find new meaning and esteem through more progressive faith communities.

Over recent decades, traditional gender role relations and childrearing practices have been in transformation in couples and families worldwide (see Knudson-Martin, Chapter 14, this volume). Among Evangelical Christians, men tend to maintain patriarchal expectations for the husband/father to be the “spiritual head” of the family. Wilcox (2004) terms them “soft patriarchs”: authoritative and strict, yet less authoritarian and more warm and expressive in interactions than past generations. Mainline Protestant men tend toward a more egalitarian position in marriage and in sharing household responsibilities (Anderson, 2009).

**Sexual Orientation and Heterosexual Orthodoxy**

The condemnation of homosexuality in religious doctrine has been a source of deep anguish for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons. Some denominations have adopted a loving acceptance of gay persons as human beings created by God, yet abhor same-sex practices as unnatural and sinful, and oppose gay marriage and parenting. This dualistic position (“hate the sin, but love the sinner”) perpetuates stigma and shame, producing a deep schism in an individual’s gender identity and sexual orientation. Many have abandoned their childhood faith, feeling that to accept themselves, they must reject their religion. Increasingly, many religious clergy and congregations have been challenging institutional orthodoxy for the full acceptance of persons and relationships of diverse sexual orientation as human rights issues for equality and social justice. Yet LGBT persons may still confront heterosexist religiosity in their family or social networks and community. Family conflict and cutoff can be fueled by members’ religious convictions or congregational stance.

The diversity among LGBT individuals, couples, and families requires an especially broad approach to spirituality. The challenges presented by religious
dogma have not undermined the importance of spirituality for most (Tan, 2005). Some focus on their personal relationship with a God that loves them unconditionally (Lease & Shulman, 2003). Many seek out gay-inclusive faith communities, and focus on self-exploration and spiritual growth. Some turn to alternative approaches, such as earth-spirited faith (Smith & Horne, 2007) that emphasize personal versus institutional authority over spiritual matters.

**SPIRITUAL RESOURCES IN FAMILY LIFE**

Abundant research documents the powerful influence of spiritual beliefs and practices for well-being, recovery, and resilience (Koenig, 2005; Walsh, 2009b). Although affiliation and adherence to formal religion have been declining, what matters for most is a deep personal spirituality, guided by values that are lived out in daily lives and relationships (Wendel, 2003). Many, varied spiritual practices can enrich family relationships as they deepen the spiritual dimension of family life.

**Contemplative Practices: Prayer, Meditation, and Shared Rituals**

For most people, prayer originates in the family, is centered in the home, and grows in importance over the life course. Among Americans, 90% pray in some fashion at least weekly; three in four pray daily (Gallup, Inc., 2008). Prayer at bedtime and expressing gratitude before meals are common practices. Most people report that they pray whenever they feel the need. As one single parent said, “I talk to God to help my family get through hard times. We need that higher power to help us when we suffer illness or money problems or when my children get into trouble.”

Families of all faiths value some form of prayer or meditation, which serves many functions. Almost all people pray for their family’s health and happiness; very few pray for bad tidings for others. People commonly pray for strength, wisdom, or courage in facing life challenges. Many pray to seek forgiveness for sins, wrongdoing, or harm to others. Some request intercession or miracles in precarious situations, such as when a loved one’s life is at risk. Others pray that God’s will be done. Most who pray believe it makes them better persons. Nearly all report that their prayers have been heard and answered. Most say they received what they hoped for, as well as divine inspiration or a feeling of being led by God. Some (30%) have had long periods when they stopped praying, most because they got out of the habit. A few stopped because they had lost their faith, were angry with God or their church, or felt their prayers had not been answered (Gallup & Lindsay, 2000).

Contemplative practices generate feelings of tranquility, wholeness, hope, and peace. These may involve mindfulness practices, yoga, and other Eastern traditions; sacred or inspirational music or texts; chanting, reciting a rosary, use of prayer beads or a mantra; or rituals such as lighting candles or incense.
Catholics commonly offer prayers to patron Saints for guidance or intercession with God. Hindu meditation and offerings to various gods take place mostly in the home, before small statues and shrines. One of the five pillars of Islam is ritual prayer observance, five times daily. For Muslims, prayer expresses praise and gratitude for life itself and helps to keep life in perspective (Nasr, 2002). Many who are not religious value contemplative practices for physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being. Shared meditative experiences by couples and family members foster genuine and empathic relating, reduce defensive reactivity, and deepen bonds (Carson, Carson, Gil, & Baucom, 2004; Gale, 2009; Nhat Hahn, 2003).

Rituals and ceremonies connect individuals with their families and communities, as well as guiding them through life passage and times of adversity (Imber-Black, Roberts, & Whiting, 2003; see Imber-Black, Chapter 20, this volume). They facilitate unfamiliar transitions, script family actions, and comfort the dying and the bereaved. Rituals mark important events in family life and faith traditions. Couple relationships are enhanced by sharing meaningful spiritual rituals (Fiese & Tomcho, 2001). They also connect a particular joy or tragedy with all human experience, a birth or death with all others. In work with families, the observance, blending, and invention of meaningful rituals can be encouraged. This can be especially valuable for interfaith couples and multifaith families.

Involvement in Faith Communities

Congregations that flourish are vibrant communities of faith, offering a sense of belonging to a spiritual home and family (Kamya, 2009), as well as a wide range of programs to meet varied needs, through scripture reading groups, choir singing, potluck suppers, and community service. Many offer marriage and parenting skills workshops, youth mentoring, teen programs, job skills training, preventive health care, counseling, and meaningful involvement of seniors. Congregants in distress often turn to their clergy before mental health professionals. In religious study groups and support groups, as in other activities, members gain a sense of interdependence with others of shared values.

Communion with Nature

Many families, whether religious or not, find deep connection and nourishment through communion with nature—a walk at sunrise or the rhythm of waves on the shore; a camping trip; tending a garden or in a bond with a companion animal (Walsh, 2009a). Such immediate experiences take us into the moment and beyond ourselves, making us feel at one with other life and the universe. Many are drawn to visit places with high spiritual energy—sacred mountains, shrines, cathedrals, mosques, and temples; vistas of natural beauty and wonder. Living in harmony with nature and the environment is at the heart of the spirituality of indigenous communities.
Creative Arts Expression/Appreciation

Across cultures, people find inspiration in the creative arts, such as painting, poetry, and drama, that communicate our common humanity. Music in many forms can offer a powerful, transcendent experience. Native Americans say, “To watch us dance is to hear our hearts speak.” African American gospel spirituals, blues, jazz, and soul music are creative expressions forged out of the cauldron of slavery, racism, and impoverished conditions, transcending those scarring experiences through the resilience of the human spirit.

Community Service/Social Activism

Engaging in community service or social activism can be a transformative expression of spirituality. Efforts to alleviate suffering and to mend the social fabric (e.g., Judaism’s *tikkun olam*) are at the heart of all major faith traditions and humanistic movements (Perry & Rolland, 2009). When family members share in purposeful efforts, it strengthens their bonds as it deepens compassion and connection with others. A tragedy can spark new purpose. In one family, after the suicide of a beloved daughter who had suffered with bipolar disorder, the parents organized an annual community forum in her memory to advocate for mental health research, treatment, and prevention to benefit others. Therapists can listen for such inspiration: the urge to make a difference, to act so that something good might come out of a tragedy and in doing so further a family’s own healing.

Intimate Bonds and Transcendent Connections

Intimate bonds with authentic communication are the most immediate and profound expressions of spirituality and offer pathways for spiritual and relational growth (Fishbane, 1998). We experience deep connections with “kin-dred spirits” and “soul mates.” Caring bonds with partners, family members, and close friends can nourish spiritual well-being; in turn spirituality deepens and expands our connections with all others. It can be spiritually enriching to care for an infant or a frail elder, to befriend neighbors, or to offer kindness to strangers. Faith, intimacy, and resilience are interwoven: Love sustains lives, infuses them with meaning, and supports faith in overcoming adversity (Frankl, 1964/1984). Efforts to heal relational wounds and to seek or offer forgiveness are encouraged by all faith traditions (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006; Hargrave, Froeschle, & Castillo, 2009; Legaree, Turner, & Lollis, 2007).

The transcendent connectedness of family and community is forged through shared values, commitment, and mutual support through adversity. In contrast to the highly individualized concept of human autonomy centered on the “self” in Western societies, most cultures and religions worldwide view
the person as embedded within the family and larger community. Despite the
diversity of perspectives, the broad aim of spirituality remains constant: to be
open to the transcendent dimension of life and all relationships, both in ordi-
nary, everyday activity and in the midst of adversity.

FROM MULTIFAITH DIVERSITY TO SPIRITUAL PLURALISM

The wide spectrum of faiths today attests to their strength and vitality. A
broader spirituality is expected to continue in significance over the coming
decades, shaped less by institutions and more by those who are seeking greater
meaning and connection. In our rapidly changing world, religion is less often a
given that people are born into and accept unquestioningly. Increasingly, indi-
viduals, couples, and families are forging their own spiritual paths, choosing
among beliefs and practices to fit their life circumstances and relationships.
This combining of varied elements has been likened to a platter of “religious
linguini” (Deloria, 1994). Many are creating their own recipes for spiritual
nourishment.

Our challenge is to move from a recognition of diversity to a spiritual plu-
ralism (Eck, 2006). “Diversity” refers simply to many differences—splendid,
colorful, perhaps threatening. “Spiritual pluralism” involves engagement and
relationship with each other that creates a common society from multifaith
diversity. Interfaith coalitions tackle shared concerns such as teen pregnancy,
hunger, and homelessness, and galvanize support for disaster recovery and
peace initiatives (see Harvard’s Pluralism Project at www.pluralism.org).

With respect—more than the tolerance—of differences, pluralism requires
understanding of both distinctiveness and commonalities. It involves broad
inclusiveness of people of every faith, and of none, nurturing constructive
dialogue, mutual understanding, and connectedness. Similarly, with growing
spiritual diversity within families, members who follow different paths can
strengthen bonds by engaging in dialogue, respect, and mutual under-
standing and coalescing around shared values and practices. With the increase of
interfaith couples and multifaith families, this broad spiritual pluralism is all
the more important (Walsh, 2010).

ADDRESSING THE SPIRITUAL DIMENSION IN CLINICAL PRACTICE

Spiritual beliefs and practices influence the ways that families deal with adver-
sity, their experience of suffering, and the meaning of symptoms (Wright,
2009). They also influence how family members communicate about their
problems; their explanatory assumptions and future expectations; their
attitudes toward helpers—physicians, therapists, clergy, or faith healers; the
treatments they seek; and their preferred pathways in recovery. To be most
helpful to families, clinicians need to understand their suffering, and often its
injustice or senselessness. Many therapists feel ill equipped in their training,
constrained from broaching the subject with clients, and uncomfortable when
it does arise. When clients sense that spirituality does not belong in the clinical
context, they may censor themselves from bringing this aspect of their lives
into the therapeutic conversation.

A collaborative, biopsychosocial–spiritual systems approach to practice
is valuable in overcoming barriers to integrate spirituality in clinical practice,
in particular:

1. **Forging linkages.** Viewing clinical and pastoral domains as comple-
mentary and important to bridge through mutual referral, consulta-
tion, and collaboration. It is also important for clinicians to become
acquainted with local congregational resources and faith-based health
care and human services that fit their clients’ spiritual needs and pref-
ences.

2. **Fostering collaboration and empowerment.** Inescapably, all thera-
peutic work involves the interaction of therapists’ and clients’ value
systems. Therefore, clinicians need to deepen awareness of their own
spiritual beliefs and biases, and be mindful not to impose them on
vulnerable clients. Therapists best respect families by showing active
interest in exploring and understanding *their* values, practices, and
concerns, as with other sociocultural aspects of their lives. In working
collaboratively, therapists reflect power back in ways that empower
family members, strengthening family resilience (Walsh, 2006; see
Walsh, Chapter 17, this volume).

In efforts to integrate the spiritual dimension of experience in clinical
training and practice, the following guidelines are helpful:

- **Inquire respectfully about the meaning and importance of religious
  and/or spiritual beliefs and practices** in individual, couple, and family
  life and in relation to presenting problems and coping efforts.
  - Spiritual ecomaps, genograms, and other assessment tools can be
    helpful (Hodge, 2005; McGoldrick, Gerson, & Petry, 2008).
  - Convey a broad, multifaith perspective.
- **Explore spiritual sources of distress,** concerns that contribute to suffer-
ing or block personal and relational well-being:
  - Facilitate communication, understanding, and mutual respect around
    religious/spiritual conflicts in couples and families.
  - Facilitate compassion and possibilities for reconciliation and forgive-
    ness in wounded relationships.
Identify spiritual resources (current, past, or potential) that might contribute to healing and resilience. Encourage clients to draw on those—within or outside organized religion—that fit their values and preferences, including:
- Contemplative practices (prayer, meditation); rituals
- Relationship with God or Higher Power
- Involvement in faith community; pastoral guidance
- Communion with nature
- Expressive/creative arts
- Service to others; social activism
- Intimate bonds and connections.

With growing cultural and spiritual diversity among Americans, it is crucial not to make assumptions about personal beliefs and practices based on clients’ religious identification or upbringing. It is important to explore the dynamic nature and significance of spirituality in their lives and relationships over time. If an upbringing has not been followed, how has that affected family relationships? If clients are not religious and do not think of themselves as “spiritual,” how do they—or might they—find strength, meaning, connection, and nourishment in facing life challenges? What beliefs and practices could support their resilience, bolster their efforts, and strengthen their bonds? It is important to respect atheists’ nonbelief in God or an afterlife, exploring their views of a meaningful life and fulfilling relationships (Smith-Stoner, 2007). Some who have not been religious find that a serious crisis becomes an epiphany, opening lives to a spiritual dimension previously untapped. It can crystallize important matters and spark a reappraisal and redirection of life priorities and pursuits, as well as greater investment in significant bonds.

Exploring Spiritual Sources of Distress

Many families who suffer emotional or relational problems are also in spiritual distress or unable to invest life with meaning, which can impede coping and mastery in the face of life challenges. In addressing spirituality in its clinical complexities, its potential for harm as well as healing should be considered (Elliott Griffith & Griffith, 2002).

Spiritual beliefs can become harmful, intentionally or not, if held too narrowly, rigidly, or punitively (Griffith, 2010). Overly harsh authoritarian parenting, summoning images of a wrathful, vengeful God, can alienate members from their family and faith. Injecting spiritual superiority into relational differences or triangling God into the middle of conflicts (i.e., supporting one side against the other) has a corrosive effect (Butler & Harper, 1994). An affair with a “soul mate” may be a devastating betrayal of one’s spouse and children. A spiritual wound, as can occur with the relational trauma of sexual abuse, can block the ability to invest life with meaning or to trust others.
Religious ideations or experiences fostering guilt, shame, or worthlessness may contribute to addictions, destructive behavior, self-harm, or social isolation. Clinicians need to consider religious aspects of individual and family distress, such as concerns about sin, punishment, and afterlife.

Spiritual matters come to the fore with traumatic events, particularly with death and loss. Spiritual distress can spark relational conflict and complicate grief and adaptation for the family and all its members (Walsh, 2009c). The untimely death of an “innocent” child is often viewed as unjust and can affect the spiritual life of the bereaved. Religious condemnation of suicide compounds the anguish of families; final rites and cemetery burial may not be allowed. Such spiritual issues complicate an agonizing death and loss for the entire family and can spark intense conflict (Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004). Some draw closer to their faith, whereas others question or turn away from faith and family.

When patriarchal religious precepts are used to justify violence toward women and children, family therapists have an ethical responsibility to protect those in harms way and to address abusive behavior, whether rooted in family, ethnic, or religious beliefs and traditions. Therapists can engage in terms of transcendent values across faiths, which condemn violence and teach loving kindness, justice, and respect, honoring the dignity and worth of loved ones (Anderson, 2009). When the sexual orientation of a family member is a source of pain or cutoff in families that hold conservative religious views, therapists may be helpful in opening dialogue to facilitate understanding and loving acceptance. Unfounded fears of harm to children raised by gay parents can be allayed by information from research evidence of their well-being (see Walsh, Chapter 1, and Green, Chapter 8, this volume).

Many who seek help not only need to solve immediate problems but also yearn for greater meaning and purpose in life. Spiritual wellsprings can be tapped to offer a larger vision of humanity and meaningful connections that inspires their best potential. Clinicians can encourage clients to identify and draw on a wide range of potential spiritual resources that fit their values and preferences (Helmeke & Sori, 2006; Walsh, 2009d). As Pargament (2007) underscores, spiritual resources are not simply another problem-solving tool or set of therapeutic techniques. Instead, they are embedded in a larger worldview and facilitate the spiritual journey of an individual, couple, or family. They are resources for living and struggling with life’s challenges and dilemmas. They can enable our clients to tap reservoirs of hope, meaning, and inspiration.

The growing diversity and complexity of contemporary families in their approach to religion and spirituality require a broadly inclusive, multifaith perspective in clinical practice. Despite differences of faith orientation, the overarching aim of spirituality is to be open to the transcendent dimension of life and all relationships, both in everyday practice and in adversity. With a spiritual pluralism and appreciative inquiry, therapists can respect the dignity, worth, and potential of all family members and support their spiritual journey.
in seeking greater meaning, connection, and fulfillment as they move forward in their lives.

NOTE

1. Pew and Gallup organizations conduct the most widely respected surveys on religion in the United States. Survey data offer valuable perspectives yet are often not directly comparable and variously report religious “identification,” adherance,” “affiliation,” or “membership.” Also, research that categorizes subjects by their stated religion does not capture intragroup variation, the lived experience of faith, or the dynamic and complex nature of spiritual life within and outside religion.

USEFUL WEBSITES

www.religions.pewforum.org—a major source of public survey data and links to news articles on wide range of topics concerning religion and spirituality.

www.pluralism.org/resources—Pluralism Project at Harvard; offers information on a wide spectrum of faith orientations, multifaith perspectives, and interfaith initiatives.

www.beliefnet.org—offers a wide variety of spiritual resources for the general public.

REFERENCES


Wellness is much more than merely physical health, exercise or nutrition. Spiritual Wellness is the ability to establish peace and harmony in our lives. The ability to develop congruency between values and actions and to realize a common purpose that binds creation together contributes to our Spiritual Wellness. Physical Wellness is the ability to maintain a healthy quality of life that allows us to get through our daily activities without undue fatigue or physical stress. The ability to recognize that our behaviors have a significant impact on our wellness and adopting healthful habits (routine check ups, a balanced diet, exercise, etc.) while avoiding destructive habits (tobacco, drugs, alcohol, etc.) will lead to optimal Physical Wellness.