

# The significance of religion in lasting marriages

Authors: Richard A. Mackey, Bernard A. O'Brien

Persistent link: <http://hdl.handle.net/2345/1856>

This work is posted on [eScholarship@BC](#),  
Boston College University Libraries.

---

2005

## **The significance of religion in lasting marriages**

Richard A. Mackey & Bernard A. O'Brien\*

Boston College

**Journal of religion, spirituality and aging, 18 (1), 35-63.**

Dr.'s. Mackey & O'Brien are professors emeriti  
Boston College  
Chestnut Hill, MA

Correspondence should be addressed to:

Dr. Richard A. Mackey  
49 Webster St.  
Westwood, MA 02090  
E-mail: [mackeyer@comcast.net](mailto:mackeyer@comcast.net)

*All identifying information, such as names, have been disguised to protect the privacy of respondents.*

## **The significance of religion in lasting marriages**

Richard A. Mackey & Bernard A. O'Brien\*

Boston College

Dr.'s. Mackey & O'Brien are professors emeriti  
Boston College  
Chestnut Hill, MA

Correspondence should be addressed to:

Dr. Richard A. Mackey  
49 Webster St.  
Westwood, MA 02090  
E-mail: [mackeyer@comcast.net](mailto:mackeyer@comcast.net)

*All identifying information, such as names, have been disguised to protect the privacy of respondents.*

## **Abstract**

### **The significance of religion in lasting marriages**

The significance of religion in marriage has been studied in different ways. The research on which this paper is based used in-depth interviews to explore the significance of religion to a culturally diverse sample of husbands and wives who had been married to each other for over 20 years ( $M=35.25$ ,  $SD=8.25$ ). We asked individual spouses to discuss the importance to unimportance of religion in their marriages and the role that it may have played in their relationships. Both quantitative and qualitative procedures were used. An analysis of demographic and relational factors that may have shaped the importance of religion in recent years is presented. A second level of analysis was then employed to identify themes about the significance of religion in these marriages from the perspectives of each spouse. Three themes were identified: mixed to no significance of religion on marriage, religion as supportive and emerging spirituality.

#### **Key words:**

marriage, religion, religiosity, spirituality, gerontology

## **The significance of religion in lasting marriages**

This paper is based on research that focused on adaptation in lasting marriages (Mackey, Diemer & O'Brien, 2000; Mackey & O'Brien, 1999; Mackey & O'Brien, 1995). The intent of the research was to understand the meanings associated with various aspects of marital relationships from the perspectives of individual spouses. We explored how spouses viewed different dimensions of their relationships, such as intimacy, conflict management styles and the importance to unimportance (i.e. significance) of religion in their marriages.

Unlike most studies of religion and marriage, we purposively recruited an ethnically diverse sample of couples who had been married more than 20 years ( $M=35.25, SD=8.5$ ). In-depth interviews were conducted with 144 spouses in 72 marriages. Compared to many studies, which focus on the potential relationships between marriage and religiosity, such as frequency of attendance at services and prayer, we explored the significance of religion by asking respondents to discuss how important to unimportant religion was to their marriages and the role(s) that it may have played in their relationships. The goal of our study was to understand the significance of religion from the perspectives of spouses in these long-term marriages. There is no pretense that the findings can be generalized, an important distinction between research designed to test hypotheses and research designed to develop theory.

This paper addresses the following questions:

What factors shape the significance of religion to spouses in these lasting marriages?

What themes emerging from these interviews help in understanding the significance of religion in the recent years of these marriages?

In the next section, recent research on marriage is reviewed followed by a discussion of the methodology of our study. The findings are then presented: quantitative results are presented along with the

qualitative source data from interviews and a discussion of the findings. The limitations of the study are then discussed followed by a conclusion.

### **Recent literature**

Recent surveys (Gallup & Lindsay, 1999) have found that most Americans believe in a God, and substantial numbers of them report that religious beliefs play an important role in their lives. Studies (Miller & Thoresen, 2003) have found a correlation between religious factors, including spirituality, and the effectiveness of coping with serious health problems. In recent years there has been increasing attention in the professional literature to the role of religion in marriage.

Weaver and his associates (Weaver, et al, 2002) reviewed articles on research related to religion and, marriage in six marriage and family journals from 1995 to 1999. They compared the number of articles with a research outline protocol, which included a "methods and results section" (p. 296), with research articles that contained a religious variable. Overall, 114 out of 868 empirical papers were identified that "used two or more items or questions to assess religious affiliation, religious practice and belief" (p. 296). Slightly over thirteen percent of all articles in these six periodicals met these criteria. Interestingly, the two journals with the highest percent of articles with religious variables were oriented primarily to research (24%) and therapy (23%). Of the articles reviewed, six focused on marriage preparation and another 10 on marital adjustment and satisfaction. The authors noted that the percentage of empirical articles in these six marriages and family journals that contained at least one religious variable was higher than comparable journals in psychiatry, gerontology, psychology and nursing.

Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar and Swank (2001) conducted a meta-analytic review of the research literature in the 1980's and 90's, a primary focus of which was the potential connections between religion and marriage. They located a total of 94 papers that focused on religion and marriage, 16 of which utilized qualitative methods and 78 quantitative methods. In reviewing the research based on quantitative methodologies, the authors found that most studies relied on broadly based samples at national and community levels, which reduced the bias inherent in more limited samples. They tended to use cross-sectional

approaches to data collection, however, that created difficulties in understanding the potential causal significance of religion on marriage. Also, 57% of these studies used single item measures, such as church attendance, to assess the link between religion and aspects of marital life. A significant limitation in the design of these quantitative studies was their reliance on one family member in collecting data. We mention these observations because they are germane to the potentials and limitations of our research, which will be addressed later in this paper.

In studies that "controlled for demographic factors related to divorce, the relatively small link between religious affiliation and divorce disappeared" (Mahoney et al, 2001, p.566). That finding challenged the belief that divorce rates are linked to religiosity alone. While couples that were actively involved with religious institutions tended to have more stable marriages than other couples, the matter was complex and needed to be understood within a wider context. Research that focused narrowly on correlations between two variables, such as attendance at services and marital stability, may paint a skewed picture of a piece of reality that is shaped by several interacting dynamics. That limitation may be especially problematic with selective samples, such as the sample in our research.

Although the Mahoney et al (2000) review of empirical studies spanning two decades found a weak link between religious affiliation and satisfaction with marriages, the link "between involvement in religion and global marital satisfaction" (p. 568) had more substantial support. It appeared that satisfaction with one's marriage was shaped by the significance of religious values in one's personal life. In other words, individuals who struggled to integrate those values into their lives, including marital relationships, may have experienced higher levels of satisfaction with their marriages. The authors noted the limitations, however, in single item measures of satisfaction. The design limitations in studies that relied on questionnaires and telephone interviews limited opportunities to assess satisfaction, which would have been possible with multiple measures. Even fewer studies were able to assess the potential connection between marital satisfaction and religion by asking subjects to express the significance of those variables in their own words. In contrast, our

methodology relied primarily on in-depth interviews to elicit the perspectives of individual spouses about the significance of religion in these marriages.

Amato and Rogers (1997) reported on a study of contributors to divorce, which used a prospective methodology with a national sample of 2,033, married individuals. Using telephone interviews beginning in 1980, panel members were called back in 1982, 1988 and 1992 to assess potential links between factors in marriage and divorce. Their theoretical model distinguished between distal and proximal factors that may have caused divorce. Distal factors included church attendance while proximal ones referred to relational problems that had adverse effects on marriages. While the sample was purportedly representative of married persons in the United States, respondents were married individuals but not couples. Also, attrition of respondents after the first wave of interviews resulted in an under-representation of people of color and individuals who did not have a college education.

Using logistic regression procedures, two theoretical models were tested, one containing only distal factors and the second containing distal and proximal factors. The regression analysis for each model revealed that church attendance was a powerful predictor of divorce ( $p = < .001$ ). The authors concluded that "frequent church attendance appears to lower the likelihood of divorce" (Amato & Rogers, 1997, p. 623). They suggested that the variable of church attendance reflected the internalization of behavioral norms that decrease marital conflict. Also, divorce for church attendees may have jeopardized the support of their faith communities (Amato & Rogers, 1997). The findings about the role of church attendance and marital stability were persuasive in view of the robust sample, the prospective research design and the employment of regression techniques to identify predictors of divorce.

Another study, which was based on a sample of respondents in the National Survey of Families and Households, examined the significance of religiosity on marital stability (Call & Heaton, 1997). Four thousand five hundred eighty seven individuals who were married at two waves, one in 1987/88 and the second in 1992/94, were interviewed. Several theoretical models were constructed and tested with logistic regression. Identification with specific religion or no identified religious affiliation were not significant predictors of



separation / divorce when demographic factors, such as duration of marriages, race and educational levels of spouses were included in a model. Differences between spouses about attendance at religious services put couples at risk for separation / divorce. Compared to husbands, the beliefs of wives about commitment to their marriages and their attitudes about non-marital sexual relations were more influential to the stability of their marital relationships.

This review is helpful in understanding factors that may shape the significance of religion in marriage, if only to underscore the inconclusiveness of the data from various studies. It is also useful in placing our research in perspective. Unlike most studies, our sample was deliberately selected to include couples that were diverse in race, education, income and occupation. Another distinguishing characteristic was the stability of these marriages that had lasted an average of 35 years. Compared to research that relies on questionnaires and less intensive telephone interviews, the use of in-depth interviews in the current research yielded rich data from the perspectives of individual spouses. Since no attempt was made to randomize the sample, generalizations to a wider population are not possible. The purpose of the research is to understand factors in marriages that last so as to contribute to the development of theory. The data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative procedures, which was also different from previous research on the potential relationship between religion and marriage.

### **Method**

A semi-structured interview format was developed after a review of the literature; the interview guide was pretested by the researchers. Collaborative researchers conducted additional pilot testing and provided feedback that led to further refinement of the interview guide.

The guide was divided into four sections: the relationship including roles and conflict management styles, socio-cultural factors including the religious practices and the importance to unimportance of religion in their marriages, the relationships of their parents' marriages and the observations of changes in their relationships from early to recent years. The recent years, which are the focus of this paper, were the years

after the youngest child had reach 18 years of age; generally, that period included the last 5-10 years of their marriages prior to the interviews.

The interview structure was designed to acquire in-depth information from the point of view of individual respondents in order to develop an understanding of how each spouse adapted over the life span of their relationships. An open-ended style of interviewing was followed to allow for freedom of expression. Focal questions, such as how important religion was to these marriages, were used to elicit information from the perspectives of each respondent. Interviews were exploratory which allowed respondents to express their individual perceptions of their interactions with spouses within their own frame of reference. That approach, which adapted clinical interviewing skills to the needs of the research, explored the experiences of individuals within relationships as they remembered and reported them.

Interviewers, who were advanced doctoral students with extensive clinical experience, were trained in the use of the interview guide. They were respectful and accepting of the uniqueness of each respondent's perceptions. Their empathic interviewing skills were a valuable resource in collecting the data (Hill, Thomson and Williams, 1997).

The interviews were held in the homes of respondents, which provided additional information about their lifestyles and environments. Prior to each interview, respondents were told about the purpose of the study, given an overview of the interview schedule and were assured their identities would remain anonymous. Informed consent for audiotaping and the research use of interviews were obtained. Each partner was interviewed separately; the length of each of the interviews was approximately two hours.

### Sample

Couples were recruited through business, professional and trade union organizations as well as through churches, synagogues, and a variety of other community organizations. Most couples resided in the northeast part of the country.

The sample was chosen purposively to fit with the goal of developing an understanding of a diverse and older group of heterosexual couples in lasting relationships. Couples were recruited who met the following criteria:

1. married at least 20 years;
2. diversity of race and ethnicity, socio-economic status, and religious background;
3. parents whose youngest child was at least 18 years of age; and
4. no psychotherapy for marital conflict.

Despite the heterogeneity of the sample as a whole, individual couples were homogeneous in terms of their race and religion. In other words, Blacks were married to Blacks and Catholics to Catholics. To have included spouses with different races and religions was beyond the scope of the study.

Of the 144 spouses who were interviewed, 64% were White and 36 % were people of color (African-Americans and Mexican-Americans). The religious backgrounds was as follows: 44 % were Protestant; 35 % were Catholic; and 21% were Jewish. Forty-four percent were college graduates and 56% were non-college graduates. The mean age for the sample as a whole was 59.63 years (S.D.= 9.29): 16% of respondents were in their 40's, 36% in their 50's, 29% in their 60's, and 19% in their 70's. The mean number of years together was 35.25 (S.D.= 8.50): 26% of couples had been together 40 years or longer; 42% between 30 and 39 years; and 32% between 20 and 29 years. Forty-two percent had 1 or 2 children, 43% had 3 or 4 and 15% had 5 or more children. By total gross family income, 10% of couples earned less than \$25,000; 30% between \$25,000 and \$49,999; 27% between \$50,000 and \$74,999; and 33 % had gross incomes of \$75,000 or more.

### Coding

Each interview was tape recorded and transcribed to facilitate coding and to prepare the data for both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Interview passages were coded for relational themes that were then developed into categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Initially, a research team (2 women, 2 men) coded eight transcripts blindly and individually. Detailed notes were kept and categories were generated. A relationship coding sheet was developed and used in subsequent coding of eight additional interviews. As new categories arose previous interviews were re-coded in keeping with the constant comparative process. Having both females and males involved in that process helped control for gender bias and contributed to the development of a shared conceptual analysis. Using this method, a scoring system was developed to identify themes that evolved from each section of the interviews. There were over 90 categories in 24 topic areas for every respondent.

Once the Relationship Coding Sheet was developed, each interview was coded and scored independently by two raters (one male and one female) who noted categories and themes as they emerged from the transcripts. One of the authors coded all 144 interviews to insure continuity in the operational definitions of variables and consistency of judgments from case to case. The agreement between raters, determined by dividing the number of identical judgments by the total number of codes, was 87%. Cohen's kappa, used as a measure of inter-rater reliability, ranged from .79 to .93. When discrepancies occurred, the raters met to discuss their differences and to re-examine the original transcripts until a consensus was reached as to how a particular item was to be scored.

HyperResearch software (Hesse-Biber, Dupuis and Kinder, 1992) enabled the researchers to do a thorough content analysis of interview transcripts, which totaled over 5,000 double-spaced pages, and to identify, catalogue and organize specific interview passages on which categorical codes were based.

To identify factors that may have been associated with the significance of religion in recent years, which was operationally defined by how respondents expressed importance to unimportance of religion in their marriages and the role that it may have played in their relationships, a chi-square analysis was conducted with all the variables in the study and the significance of religion during recent years. Based on those results a theoretical model was constructed and tested with logistic regression. In order to accommodate the requirements for the use of logistic regression, each variable was re-coded into dichotomous categories. For the independent variables of the significance of religion in early and child rearing years, as well as the

dependent variable of the significance of religion in recent years, the original category of positive was coded '1,' the categories of mixed, negative and no significance were recoded '0,' and labeled mix/neg/no. The variable of years married was recoded into under 30, which was assigned a '0' and 30 years and over, which was assigned a '1.' For the factor, satisfaction with marriage during child rearing, the negative category was assigned a value of '0' and the positive category a value of '1.' The categories for satisfaction were based on how respondents felt about their marital relationships. For each religion, a separate regression analysis was conducted. Each of the three religions was treated as a separate reference group and coded '1' with the other combined groups assigned a value of '0.' Each model was then tested with logistic regression.

### Data analysis

The coded data from the scoring sheets yielded frequencies, which were analyzed using SPSS software. Chi square analysis was used to examine the relationship between the independent variables - which included personal, demographic and respondents' reports of various dimensions of relationships - and the dependent variable of respondents' observations about the significance of religion to their relationships in recent years. The Alpha criterion was set at .001 for the chi-square analysis.

The chi-square statistic was appropriate since certain conditions were met. First, it has been very difficult to ensure randomness of samples in social and behavioral research, especially in studies that focus on populations and topics that have received relatively little attention by researchers. This non-probability sample was selected deliberately to include older couples who have been understudied in previous research; namely, a diverse group of married couples who had remained together for more than 20 years. The goal was to identify factors that contributed to the significance of religion in these marriages from the perspectives of individual spouses rather than to test hypotheses. Second, compared to other tests of statistical significance, chi-square has fewer requirements about population characteristics. Third, the expected frequency of 5 observations in most cells was met.

Variables that were related ( $p = < .001$ ) to the observations of respondents about the significance of religion to their relationships in recent years (see Table 1) were selected for building three theoretical models,

each of which contained a different religion as the reference group. After re-coding each variable, the models were tested using logistic regression analysis to identify factors that may predict the significance of religion to these marriages in recent years (see Table 2). Logistic regression was a useful tool in this exploratory research where the goal was to develop theory rather to test theory (Menard, 1995).

A content analysis was then conducted on the interview data in order to understand what significance religion may have had on these marriages from the perspectives of individual spouses. The goal of that analysis was to identify themes that might help in understanding the meaning of religion in these relationships.

### Defining the significance of religion

The dependent variable was the significance of religion to these marriages during recent years. Respondents were asked to discuss the meaning of religion and religious beliefs to their marital relationships over the years and how important religion was in their lives together. These explorations yielded rich data about the role of religion from early years before children, through the child rearing and into recent years, which included the period of time after the youngest child had reached the age of 18 years. Importance of religion ranged from negative to positive depending on how individuals responded to this inquiry. This variable was coded originally into four categories: negative, mixed, positive and no influence.

The following passages from an interview with Donna, a 57 year old Catholic woman, illustrate the significance of religion from the early years of a marriage to the recent years. Even though her religious practices and the role of religion in her life changed, the significance of religion remained positive over the years, a theme not uncommon in the stories of other respondents. Married for 36 years and the mother of nine children, this 57 year old woman reflected back on the significance of Catholicism to her and her husband, especially those teachings related to birth control. As a result of conflict with the church on the use of birth control, after giving birth to eight children, an estrangement from the church occurred:

*I was brought up, you know, whatever God gave you, you accepted and I fully believed that. I didn't think I had choices which was kind of naive or stupid. But, I think David and I, because of the religion and everything, just felt as though you know whatever God gave us we have to accept and we did. And*

*I can remember very well after (our youngest child) was born there was a period in my life that I didn't go to church for a while because I had gone to confession and wanting to practice birth control after eight children. The priest was telling me no and he wouldn't give me absolution and everything and that really upset me. I stayed away from church for a while because I was very bitter ... I'd talk to myself and I'd say now why am I getting like this ... I learned very late that you can use your own mind and make those decisions on those things; that should be probably between God and you and nobody else. But it wasn't the way I was brought up. Nor the way David was brought up.*

Donna then talked about the positive effect of religion on their marriage and the rearing of their children:

*I think religion had a very good effect on our marriage. I think it brought us very close. I think we were stronger about it in the first years of marriage. Well, when we first got married and probably while the children were young, we were very religious both of us but our habits have changed a lot. I would never have thought of missing mass years ago, but I would now. David wouldn't. He's probably stronger at it than I am; yet probably to begin with I was stronger. We used to go to mass every morning when we were first married. We always took the kids to church on Sundays and always said grace before meals with the kids and it was just part of our life. I think the kids got a good background in it.*

Catholicism remained an important part of their married and family life. In recent years, its significance changed. Donna appeared to find meaning then in the spiritual aspects of her religion and was less preoccupied with the structure and rules of the church:

*I don't know why I have changed as far as religion goes. I still go to mass 90% of the time ... before, I would feel guilty if I didn't go. Now I don't have the guilt feelings if I don't go. I feel as though it should be something you want to do. Religion is still to me a very important thing and I think there isn't a day that goes by that I don't think religion. But the structured religion isn't as important to me as the way I act as a person. Like, one night David and I were going out to mass. There's an old lady*

*that used to live next door. She was in a nursing home and I hadn't seen her for a while. We were supposed to be going to mass and I said to David: "I want to go and see Mrs. F instead of going to mass." And he said: "Well, this is the last mass. We have to go tonight." And I said: "I think God would appreciate it just as much if we went to visit with Mrs. F." So we went to see Mrs. F. That's what I mean; another time I would never have done that. You could do both if you organized your time right but that's kind of how I am now. I do what I feel is important.*

Although the meaning of religious beliefs and practices changed over the years, Catholicism retained an importance to this woman as an individual, to her marriage and to her family. The excerpts reported here offer a sense of the meaning of religion in the lives of respondents and how the significance of religion evolved from early to recent years. For Donna, there was a spiritual quality to her religious orientation in recent years that emerged from a different attachment to the church in earlier years.

#### Independent variables

The chi-square analysis (see Table 1) identified five factors that were related significantly to the reports of respondents about the significance of religion during recent years ( $p = < .001$ ). They included religion that was defined as the reported religious identities of respondents: Catholic, Protestant and Jew. Other significant factors included the importance of religion during the early years of these marriages (before children) and during the child-rearing years (beginning with the birth of the first child and ending with the eighteenth birthday of the youngest child). A fourth factor was years married, which was coded into three categories: under 30 years, 30-40 years and over 40 years. A fifth factor related significantly to the dependent variable was reported satisfaction with marital relationships during the child-rearing years, which was based on how respondents discussed their feelings about marital relationships. Based on the chi square results, three theoretical models were constructed and tested with logistic regression.

### **Findings**



Both quantitative and qualitative data are presented. First, an overview of how respondents viewed the importance to unimportance of religion in their marriages from early years to recent years is presented. Second, using the significance of religion to marriages during recent years as the dependent variable, a bivariate analysis was conducted. All other factors in the study were the independent variables. Based on results, a theoretical model was constructed and tested with logistic regression. Third, there is a discussion of the role of religion in these marriages during recent years from the interview source material on which the quantitative results were based.

Figure 1 depicts the importance of religion in these marriages from the early years, through child rearing and into recent years as reported by individual spouses:

[Insert figure 1]

The most obvious and striking data depicted in Figure 1 was the consistency of reports about the significance of religion from the early years, through child rearing and into recent years. Sixty-five to 70% of respondents responded positively to inquiries about the importance of religion over the years with 10% or less saying that religion had a negative to mixed effect on their relationships. Less than 25% of respondents reported that religion had no influence in their marriages.

To understand what demographic and relational factors may have shaped the significance of religion during recent years, we conducted a bivariate analysis of the importance of religion in recent years with all other factors in the study. Those independent variables that were related significantly to the importance of religion during recent years ( $p = < .001$ ) are presented in Table 1.

[Insert table 1]

Except for the religious identifications of respondents - Catholic, Protestant or Jewish - no demographic factors had a statistically significant relationship to the importance of religion in these marriages during recent years. Those non-statistically significant factors included age, sex, education, income and race. Of the three

religious identifications represented in the study, 27 % of Jewish spouses reported that religion had mixed to negative effects in their relationships compared to 8 % of Catholic and 2 % of Protestant spouses. Only two percent of all respondents reported that religion played no role in their marriages during recent years. The percentage of respondents who said that they had mixed feelings about the role of religion during recent years was 17% for Jews and 8% for Catholics and 2% for Protestants. Conversely, fewer Jewish respondents compared to Catholics and Protestants reported that religion had a positive effect on their marriages. More Protestant (23%) and Jewish respondents (27%) compared to Catholics (16 %) reported no significance of religion on their relationships during recent years ( $X^2=18.37$  (2DF)  $P = <.001$ ).

If religion was important in the earlier years of these marriages, it was also important during recent years ( $X^2=102.92$  (2DF)  $p=<.001$ ) . If religion was important during the child rearing years, it was also significant in recent years ( $X^2=288.00$  (2DF)  $p = <.001$ ). Over nine out of 10 respondents who said that religion was important during the early and child rearing years also reported its significant during recent years. Individuals who reported satisfaction with their marriages during the child rearing years also viewed religion as significant during recent years ( $X^2=14.70$  (2DF)  $p = <.001$ ). During the child rearing years, respondents, mostly women, reported being the least satisfied with their marriages compared to early and recent years. During the child rearing years, 46% of wives compared to 25 % of husbands reported mixed to negative feelings about their marriages ( $X^2=6.83$  (1 DF)  $p = <.01$ ). The number of years that couples were married was also related to the significance of religion in recent years ( $X^2=5.42$  (2DF)  $p = <.001$ ). Approximately 75 % of spouses married more than 30 years compared to 57 % of spouses married less than 30 years reported religion as significant to their marriages. Spouses married less than 30 years were also more likely to report that religion had no significance in their marriages.

Relational factors with the exception of satisfaction with marriage during the child-rearing years were not related statistically related to the importance of religion during recent years. Those relational factors included psychological intimacy, the quality of sexual relations, and the seriousness of marital conflict and conflict management styles of spouses.

The results of the chi-square analysis were used to construct a theoretical model to test what factors may predict the importance of religion in these relationships during recent years. The model was tested using logistic regression. In the table 2, the values for each religion as a reference group are reported under religion. The values for the other variables are for Protestants as the reference group. Those values (importance during early years, importance during child rearing, satisfaction with marriage during child rearing and years married) for each of the other religions as a reference group were not appreciably different from Protestants. If readers wish to examine those values, they are available from the authors. The results of the regression analysis are shown in table 2.

*[Insert table 2]*

The regression analysis revealed that the importance of religion during child rearing had the most impact in shaping the significance of religion in these marriages during recent years ( $B=4.27$ ,  $p = < .001$ ). Satisfaction with marital relationships during the child rearing years approached statistical significance ( $B=1.27$ ,  $p = < .06$ ). The other factors in the model (religion, importance of religion during the early years and years married) did not predict the significance of religion in recent years.

We turn now to a discussion of themes from the interview data on which the quantitative results were based. While the statistical data above showed the stability of the importance of religion in these marriages over the years, the following discussion helps to clarify the significance of religion during the recent years from the perspective of each spouse. These themes were:

mixed to no significance of religion on marriage,  
religion as supportive, and  
emerging spirituality.

#### Mixed to no significance of religion

During recent years, Jewish respondents compared to Catholics and Protestants were more likely to think of their religion as having mixed effects or no significance in their marriages. Seventeen percent of Jews

compared to 2% of Protestants and 8% of Catholics viewed religion as having a mixed effect on their marriages in those years. Conversely, 47% of Jews compared to 76% of Catholics and 75% of Protestants reported that religion had a positive effect. Compared to Catholics (16%), Protestants (23%) and Jews (27%) were more likely to say that religion had no significance in their marriages. Grover, a 53 year old Jewish husband married for 31 years and the father of three children talked about the role of religion in their marriage during recent years:

*Gladys and I have very much the same religious beliefs. We are not very religious people as far as the ceremonies and going to temple, but we do have a firm belief in God .... We did join a temple when the kids were starting to get to that age. We wanted to at least give them that exposure. We would go religiously with them. Our kids have the same kind of beliefs as we do to a certain extent in that there is a God, but not in an organized religious way ... We never really felt strongly that you had to go to services and all to be a good religious person. We both felt that way from the first time we met. Maybe that is one of the compatible things about us.*

This vignette illustrated the role that one's religious heritage may have even when religiosity declines. Beliefs and values may continue to be important in one's life and have a positive effect on marital relationships, which were evident in the comments of Grover. The quote illustrated the meaning of religion even when religious practices, such as regular attendance at services, become less significant. As will become evident in subsequent analysis of the data, the distinction between the categories of "positive" and "no significance" was often not crisply differentiated, especially among Jewish respondents. For example, Grover had integrated values from his religious background while reporting that religious practices did not currently play an important role in their marriage.

Gladys, his 53 year old wife, observed:

*I think we both feel the same about religion. We are both reformed Jews. We raised our family to be Jewish. Judaism was not something that was the number one thing of our marriage ... other things were more significant than religion. It was just something that we had in common ... I am glad we are*

*the same religion because it gave us a common bond. I don't think it is what made our marriage successful or not successful. It had no significance on our sense of commitment to the relationship. Although we are Jewish we practice our Judaism in a sense in our own way. I don't think our religion had anything to do with our commitment unless it might have been the way we were raised. It is just part of us.*

Gladys underscored and reinforced the value of assessing the significance of religion at more than one level and in more than one way. She identified the significance of internalized values that she and Grover shared even when religiosity changed or faded into the background of family life. Similarities in values, likely in part coming from their backgrounds that included Judaism may have helped to maintain and to strengthen the bonds between them, as well as the bonds between other spouses. As Gladys points out, any connection of marital commitment now to religious backgrounds is very difficult to assess.

#### Religion as supportive

Most respondents talked positively about the role of religion in their relationships. During recent years, three out of four Catholics and Protestants and almost two out of four Jews expressed positive thoughts and feeling about the significance of religion in their marriages. Those ratios about the significance of religion during recent years were similar in the child rearing and early years. When respondents discussed religion as supportive to their marriages and to their families, they often referred to a structure that had become an integral part of their lives. Among Mexican American respondents, this theme was evident in the comments of Gonzalo, 47 years old and married for 29 years:

*I guess its seeing people together in community, love, sharing; you know this is what it's all about. This is what I want, this is what a lot of the Hispanic families around the community want to feel ... Everybody's in a nice mood around here, everybody's real cheerful, you know the priest and everybody like that and it's made us more family, not only in the church, but in the community ... The people in the barrio here have a big respect for the church. There is no graffiti on the seven buildings here and none, but right down the block you'll see it. The church has changed our life, mine and Guadalupe's.*

The positive influence of religion to Gonzalo and to several Mexican Americans was connected to the Catholic Church as an integral part of their communities. The church was important as a spiritual resource but also as a means of social connectedness with their community. More than any other ethnic group, Mexican Americans tended to speak in this way about how religion was a supportive resource in their lives and in their marriages.

Guadalupe, his 43 year old spouse, talked of the significance of religion in their lives:

*I think what has helped out marriage is that we like the spiritual aspect of our lives and got more involved in it and I think that's what has helped us a lot ... We have a deeper need for God in our lives Before, we just needed to do things, but not pray about it ... Before we never did bless our food and now before anybody sits down to eat, we bless our food. So it's just a totally different way of life, a spiritual life to fall back on.*

For several African Americans, religion served as a meaningful resource in their lives. Their faiths offered a means for coping with racism, which was discussed by several Black respondents. Faith and prayer were mentioned often, as African Americans expressed their thoughts about the meaning of religion in their lives and in their marriages. The themes of faith and prayer are evident in the following passages from interviews with a Black couple, Douglas and Della, the parents of four children, who had been married for 37 years. As Douglas responded to the question about the importance of religion in their marriage, he at first denied its significance:

*I don't know if it played a big role in my life. I really can't see where it really did. But I didn't want to do things wrong ... I figured that you should live a certain way, that God expects you to live a certain way. And I knew that I better try to live a certain way, or then I was going to have problems in my life and in my marriage ... I needed so much help in my life ... I needed to go to church. I needed something like that in my life. Today I know that.*

Douglas went on to explore the significance of prayer in his relationship with Della:

*I like to pray for Della. I pray for her every morning. I get on my knees every morning. I get back down on my knees at night when I go to bed. And so it does affect me and her. I always pray for her.*

*Sometimes I pray for her during the day. So religion is a big part of our life. I forgot about that ... So religion does play a role. It has gotten more significant over the last years and it's gotten stronger.*

It wasn't unusual for religious practices, such as attendance at services, and prayer to be associated with personal problems, such as alcoholism, and other health impairments. For several individuals, like Douglas and Della, religious practices became a part of their lives from an early age. Della talked about religion as a supportive resource in their marriage, which included the importance of prayer:

*My religion, I think, is significant to helping the two of us get along. Me and him both are two Christian people. Not that everybody has to be, but, see, this is the only way that I was presented life with my parents .... I used to hear my mother praying a lot .... It was just something that was embedded in me at a very early age. I went to church with my parents. And I used to hear the things, and hear them praying to God. And they always lived a beautiful life. I said, it worked for them so it can work for me ... I've got my own personal thing with God. And I know that my direct line to him is here and now ... Religion has played a lot in our marriage ... Douglas and I were able to worship together, and I think that's a big step. For me it was.*

### Emerging spirituality

A prominent theme about the significance of religion during recent years was spirituality. More than any other aspect of religion in these marriages were references to one's inner life, values and increasingly less reliance on the structures of religion with which respondents may have been identified in earlier years.

Mark and Melinda, an African American couple in their sixties and married for 32 years, spoke of the development of religion in their lives from its origins in the structure of churches to a spiritual level in recent years. Mark and Melinda talk of their journey. Mark observed:

*I was Protestant, then Baptist, then Protestant, then Methodist, whatever. The same thing is true of Melinda. We sort of shopped around for churches ... But I don't think of religious doctrine influencing*

*us so much as the basic principles of do unto others as you'd have them do unto you type of thing is the type of thing that we sort of have ingrained, but not religion per se. I don't see it as religion is what I'm saying. You do treat people the way they should be treated. I think in terms of the bible ... to biblical kinds of things, we are very sensitive.*

Melinda reflected a similar theme to Mark and to several other respondents. She comments on the evolution of her spiritual values:

*I just feel that we came up with the basic faith, a respect for religion ... but we came up with elders who thought faith was the main thing and that things would happen because right things were supposed to happen and bad things were not supposed to happen. And eventually some being or some force would make everything right ... a lot of people think that whatever happens is God's way. I took that faith but I translated it into a faith that I could work with which is that everything that happens is not God's plan; people have a lot to do with it. I have faith that man and woman can change things ... I respect basic faith and I know that it took people a long way. And I respect it profoundly. But ... we have to make our own way.*

Although many respondents referred to spirituality, Quakers were noticeably different in how they expressed the presence of Quaker values in their marital relationships over the years. Quaker respondents reported that their religion played an important part in their marriages from the early years, through child rearing and into the recent years. They were also quite different in how most of them explicitly linked their Quaker values to their lives together as a couple. Hal, 49 years of age and married for 21 years, said:

*The value system is what I like ... It's very free, which appeals to me. It can't help but have affected our marriage. We've both had a pretty good connection with our meeting ... just observing the ebb and flow of the meeting, the diversity issues, all the things being discussed ... can't help but have a good effect on us.*

Hal expressed how Quakerism had a positive effect on him and his wife, Hope:



*Something that Quakerism does for a person, it opens the mind to understanding and forgiveness and tolerance ... I think that true Quakers should form the best marriages in the world because they are so tolerant and liberal with each other and understanding. I like to think of it this way and I think that underlies Hope's feelings for me. She understands the commitment underneath whatever I show on the surface. She knows that there are still remnants of the man she loved and married in her youth. She honors that ... I think that it certainly helped to be in a Quaker meeting, where these issues are talked about. That really helps in a marriage ... So I think marriage is made stronger by the Quaker principle of openness and discussion about one's beliefs and the issues of the day ... a good guide for all of us.*

Hope referred to the Quaker principal of simplicity and then commented on the values of self-reflection and interpersonal honesty that she tried to practice as a Quaker. She expressed how being introspective and "centered" on awareness of herself in the present, both of which had become a part of her, may have had a positive effect on their marriage

*Being open and honest with each other and listening to each other, maybe being a Quaker has affected our marriage ... I don't use the word God very much because I don't have a personal God so I'm not that kind of Quaker ... But I think trying to focus on the present, to find that island of calm in the midst of tremendous business is something that I practice. People have said to me that they feel that I am a centered person. I'm not thinking about it too much, but I think I probably do it from years and years of doing it. It helps keep me sort of steady. I think that probably helps in marriage as well as in other parts of my life ... When you grow up in a Quaker meeting and are sort of forced to look inward from young age, and you listen to messages about finding that center, it's got to have an effect.*

## **Discussion**

In discussing these findings, it is important to keep in mind that we were exploring a subject that has been neglected in previous research on marriage; namely, the significance of religion to a diverse group of couples who had been married for an average of 35 years. The research was designed to elicit understanding of

the significance of religion in these lasting marriages by inquiring about its importance to unimportance from the personal perspectives of individual spouses. The intent was to contribute to theory and not to test hypotheses. How does the data add to knowledge about religion in lasting marriages?

1. The stability of the importance associated with religion over the years was a striking finding. We had anticipated more variability in the observations of respondents about the importance of religion from the early years, through child rearing and into recent years. In exploring the role of religion in these marriages, the categories of positive, no significance and negative remained relatively constant over the years, regardless of factors such as religious identification, race/ethnicity, educational level and income. While the results of the regression analysis suggested that the importance of religion during the child rearing years predicted importance during recent years, that finding needs to be assessed in the context of its stability throughout these marriages.

2. The data raise an interesting question about the child rearing years in predicting the observations of respondents about the significance of religion during recent years. It was not only child rearing and the obligation to expose children to religious values, which several respondents mentioned, but also satisfaction with marriages during the child rearing years, which approached statistical significant in predicting the importance of religion in recent years. Although satisfaction and religion have been linked in other studies, especially among subjects who profess a devout faith (Kaslow and Robinson, 1996; Mahoney, 2000), the findings of the present study raise a different question. Subsequent studies may focus on the connections between global marital satisfaction during child rearing with spouses who view religion not only as significant during those years but also in the post-parenting years. While our data suggest a connection, further research is needed to clarify the nature of that potential relationship.

3. Researchers who plan to study religion and marriage need to consider how the role of religion may change over time. Regardless of identification with a specific denomination, many respondents who reported religion as importance throughout their marriages talked in varying ways about its meaning from early to recent years. Overall, the data suggested movement from religiosity, such as attending services, to spirituality, characterized by reflections on personal values and how they shape one's life, especially

relationships with others. The observations of Donna, Melinda and Mark illustrated that movement, which raises a question about the significance of religion to couples as they negotiate the senior years of the life span. Subsequent studies may illuminate the characteristics of individuals and couples who become more concerned with spirituality and less with religiosity as they grow older.

4. In exploring the questions that framed this research, the interview process that included genuine interest in, respect for and acceptance of the views of respondents has an advantage over other modes of data collection. This observation appears particularly important in understanding spirituality and what that means to individual spouses and their marital relationships. Through empathic modes of data collection, such as those used in this research, individuals may feel supported to explore the meaning of religion in their lives and to discuss levels of its significance that may not be readily apparent to them. The interview with Douglas illustrated the advantage of empathic interviewing as a mode of data collection. Initially, Douglas denied that religion had any importance in his marriage but, as he explored the issue, Douglas talked extensively of how significant religion had become in his relationship with Della.

5. Another advantage of empathetically informed interviews was in exploring the multidimensional and complex nature of religion in marital relationships, which was identified in a study by Call and Heaton (1997). The respondents in the present study had no difficulty in differentiating among various levels of significance that religion had to them and their marriages. Gladys and Grover spoke of this theme as they discussed the distinction between their religious experiences as Jews and the values that each of them had internalized from their backgrounds, an important part of which was Judaism. Even when individuals report that they no longer value religious practices, such as attendance at services, they may have a commitment to lead their lives in a way that is faithful to values, including their religiously based values, which have become a part of them.

6. Compared to other respondents, Quakers talked differently about the meaning of religion in their marriages. They talked very explicitly and clearly about the place of Quakerism in their lives and marriages. According to many Quakers, the belief in God as residing within each human being appeared to have a powerful effect on shaping their relational behaviors. Hal and Hope referred to other principles -openness,

honesty, tolerance and centeredness - based on Quakerism but not explicitly to the Quaker concept of God.

Other Quaker respondents talked of "honoring" human beings, since in doing so, one was honoring God whom, they believed, was present within each human being.

7. Finally, context was a significant factor in understanding the different meanings associated with the significance of religion, particularly among Mexican-American respondents. For Mexican-Americans, the practice of their religion, Catholicism, was part of a culture that valued one's religious identity as intertwined with a sense of community. Family, church and community were braided together in many of the responses of Mexican-Americans. The social fabric of Latino culture, a dimension identified by Gonzalo, appeared to be an inherent component of religion among several Mexican-Americans in this study.

### **Limitations**

Despite the richness of data elicited through the method used in this study and the advantage of using both qualitative and quantitative procedures in the analysis of the data, there are concerns about validity and reliability as well as the nature of the sample. It is difficult to assess the validity of the data in the traditional sense of that concept, since we were eliciting the personal observations of respondents about the significance of religion in their relationships at a particular point in time. The candor of respondents about highly meaningful matters, which was evident in the interview transcripts, may reflect a sense of freedom among older respondent who may not feel as constrained in their responses compared to younger individuals. There may also be less pressure for an older population to give socially acceptable responses.

In a cross sectional design in which subjects are asked to report on their life today and in the past, traditional measures of reliability are inadequate. The meaning of life events and an individual's response to these events will vary, and may even vary within the same person at different points over the life span. While longitudinal designs may be superior in contending with problems of validity and reliability, cross sectional designs that use interviews to uncover the meanings associated with relational factors in marriage, such as religion, have the strength of eliciting rich data from the perspectives of individual respondents.

There is also the issue of understanding retrospective data as an accurate depiction of reality. In one sense, the reality that is important is the psychic reality of a respondent; that is, the observations of an individual from his/her own perspective. The significance of religion is more highly individualistic than many other variables so the issue of consensual validation is not as critical to the quality of the data. However, there is another issue, which relates to whether or not an individual views social reality similarly to others who share the same social reality. Because we interviewed spouses separately, we were able to compare observations of respondents when they were reporting on common realities, such as conflict and conflict management styles. The correspondence between spouses on those types of observations offers consensual validation of certain data. For example, husbands who viewed themselves as avoidant in their conflict management styles were viewed by wives in a similar way. The converse was also true. We were also impressed with the apparent honesty of respondents when they talked of very personal matters, such as sexual dysfunction. While not conclusive, the accuracy of the data are supported by these field notes.

There is a shortfall in re-coding the data from multiple categories into dichotomous ones in order to analyze data through a quantitative lens, such as logistic regression. To offset the potential reductionistic effects of re-coding, we have incorporated a discussion of the qualitative data into the results. Indeed, the discussion of themes is the primary thrust of this paper. The integration of quantitative procedures with the qualitative analysis was intended to enhance the theory development objective of the research.

All research needs to contend with the biasing effects of the subjectivity of researchers on data. With methods that rely on face-to-face interviews as the source of data, there are special limitations. The use of an interdisciplinary team throughout the research process enhanced the quality of the study and helped to neutralize the adverse effects of subjectivity (Hill, Thompson and Williams, 1997). Issues of bias and misinterpretation were discussed along with other matters that could affect the quality of the data. A heightened sense of awareness of personal and professional predispositions that might adversely affect the research was enhanced by mutual collaboration. Having diversity in gender identifications, age and religious backgrounds on the research team was also an asset.

Finally, a significant limitation was related to the sample, which was selected purposively to include spouses in lasting relationships that are often not included in other studies; namely, diversity in color and culture as well as respondents from both blue and white collar occupations. The goal was not to test theory or to generalize but to develop an understanding of the significance of religion from the perspectives of an older group of spouses in lasting relationships. The sample fit with the goal of this exploratory study.

### **Conclusions**

The significance of religion in these lasting marriages was explored from the perspectives of individual spouses. To assess significance, we asked respondents to discuss the importance to unimportance of religion in their marriages and the role that religion may have played in their relationships. Unlike other research based on more robust samples, this study focused on a selective sample and was designed to develop an understanding of the significance of religion to a diverse group of couples that had been together for over three decades. Compared to many studies that utilize questionnaires or more structured methods of collecting data, the present study employed in-depth interviews in which the richness of individual experiences was explored. This approach appeared to be relevant to understanding the nuances associated with the significance of religion in marriage, which may become compromised when responses are bounded by discrete categories alone. Returning to the interview data enhanced an understanding of themes upon which the categories were based. This approach blended soft and hard modes of research and offered a more complete picture of reality than single approaches alone.

There was constancy to the significance of religion in these marriages over the years. Sixty-five to 70% of respondents expressed positive thoughts about religion from early to recent years. Nineteen to 26% of respondents reported that religion had no influence in their marriages and nine to 10% percent of respondents viewed religion in mixed or negative terms. Although differences were found among respondents based on their religious identifications, a regression analysis revealed that only one factor, the importance of religion during the child-rearing years, predicted the significance of religion in recent years. Socio-economic and other

demographic factors did not predict the significance of religion in recent years. Even when religious practices faded into the background of married life, several respondents reported that they endeavored to lead their lives according to values that had become a part of them from their religious backgrounds. A prominent theme about religion during recent years was spirituality. For many people in this study, the spiritual significance associated with religion eclipsed religiosity.

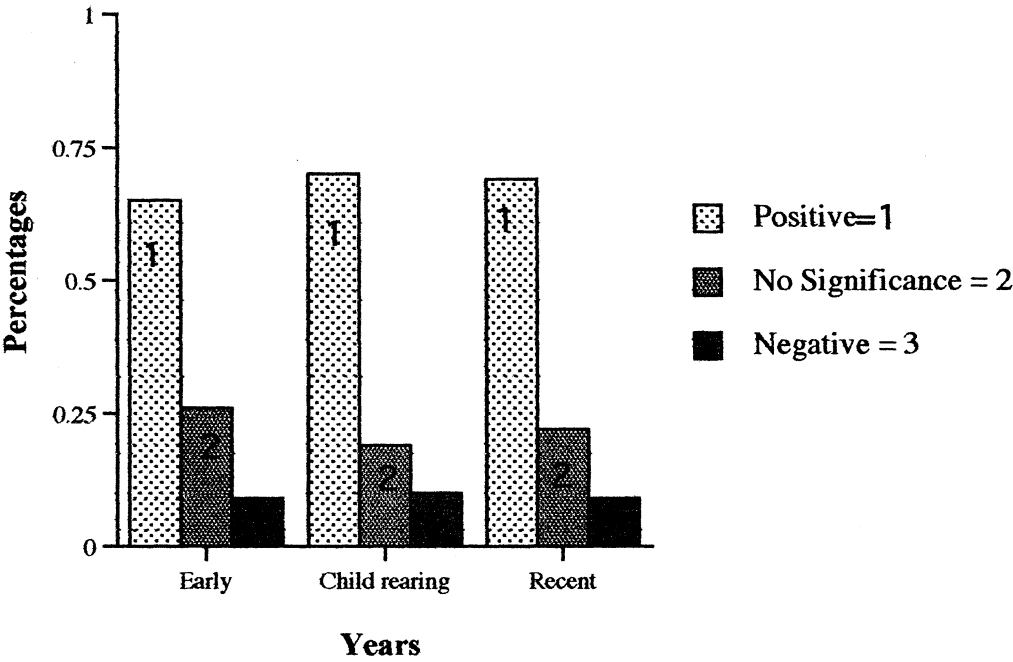
## References

- Abbott, D., Berry, M., and Meredith, W. (1990). Religious belief and practice: A Potential asset in helping families. Family Relations, 39 (4) 443-448.
- Amato, P. and Rodgers, S. (1997). A longitudinal study of marital problems and subsequent divorce. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 59 (3) 612-624.
- Booth, A., Johnson, D., Branaman, A. and Scia, A. (1995). Belief and behavior: Does religion matter in today's marriage. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 57, 661-671.
- Call, V. and Heaton, T. (1997). Religious significances on marital stability. Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion, 36 (3) 382-392.
- Gallup, G. and Lindsay, D. (1999). Surveying the religious landscape: Trends in U.S. beliefs. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse.
- Hesse-Biber, S., Dupuis, P., Kinder, T. S. (1992). HyperRESEARCH: A tool for the analysis of qualitative data. (Computer Program). Randolph (MA): Researchware.
- Hill, C.E., Thompson, B.J. and Williams, E.N. (1997). A guide to conducting consensual qualitative research. The Counseling Psychologist, 25 (4), 517-572.
- Kaslow, F. and Robinson, J. (1996). Long-term satisfying marriages: Perceptions of contributing factors. The American Journal of Family Therapy, 24 (2) 153-170.
- Mackey, R., Diemer, D. and O'Brien, B. (2000). Psychological intimacy in the lasting relationships of heterosexual and same sex relationships. Sex Roles, 43 (3/4), 201-227.
- Mackey, R., Diemer, D. and O'Brien, B. (2000). Conflict management styles of spouses in lasting relationships. Psychotherapy: Theory/Research/Practice, 37 (2), 134-148.
- Mackey, R. and O'Brien, B. (1999). Adaptation in lasting marriages: A multi-dimensional prospective. Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services, 80(6), 587-596.



- Mackey, R., O'Brien, B. and Mackey, E. (1997). Gay and lesbian couples: Voices from lasting relationships. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- Mackey, R. and O'Brien, B. (1995). Lasting marriages: Men and women growing together Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.
- Mahoney, A., Pargament, K., Tarakeshwar, N. and Swank, A. (2001). Religion in the home in the 1980's and 1990's: A meta-analytic review and conceptual analysis of links between religion, marriage, and parenting. Journal of Family Psychology, 15 (4) 559-596.
- Menard, S. (1995). Applied logistic regression analysis. Thousands Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Miller, W. and Thorsen, C. (2003). Spirituality, Religion, and Health: An emerging research field. American Psychologist, 58 (1) 24-35.
- Strauss, A. & Corbin, J. (1990). Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques. Newbury Park, CA: Sage. Press.
- Weaver, A., Samford, J., Morgan, V., Larson, D., Koenig, H. and Flannelly, K. (2002). A systematic review of research in six primary marriage and family journals: 1995-1999. The American Journal of Family Therapy, 30, 293-309.

**Figure 1: Significance of religion on marriage over the years**



**Table 1**  
**Importance of religion during recent years by religion, importance of religion in previous years ,**  
**years married and satisfaction with marriage during the child rearing years**

Factor		Importance of religion during recent years				X <sup>2</sup>
		Mixed/negative	Positive	No Influence	Totals	
Religion						
	Catholic	04	38	08	50	18.37*
	Protestant	01	48	14	64	
	Jewish	08	14	08	30	
	Totals	13	100	30	144	
Importance early years						
	Mixed/negative	06	06	01	13	102.92*
	Positive	05	86	03	94	
	No influence	02	08	27	37	
	Totals	13	100	31	144	
Importance child rearing years						
	Mixed/negative	11	03	01	13	288.00*
	Positive	02	94	05	101	
	No influence	00	03	25	28	
	Totals	13	100	31	144	
Years married						
	Under 30	06	26	14	46	5.42*
	30-40	04	46	10	60	
	Over 40	03	28	07	38	
	Totals	13	100	31	144	
Satisfaction child rearing years						
	Mixed/negative	04	27	20	51	14.70*
	Positive	09	73	11	93	
	Totals	13	100	31	144	

\* p= <.001

**Table 2**

**Logistic regression coefficients for variables associated  
with the importance of religion during recent years**

Factor	B	S.E.	Sig	Exp(B)
Religion				
Protestants as reference group	.89	.64	.17	2.43
Catholics	.51	.67	.44	1.68
Jews	-1.99	.78	.01	.14
Importance early years	.63	.83	.45	1.87
Importance child rearing	4.11	.85	.00	60.69
Satisfaction child rearing	1.35	.68	.05	3.87
Years married	.40	.66	.54	1.50
Constant	-3.40	.84		

Model  $X^2$  (4DF) = 100.18  $p < .001$