



# The effects of parental marital discord and divorce on the religious and spiritual lives of young adults <sup>☆</sup>

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 1 July 2010

Available online 27 October 2010

### Keywords:

Religion  
Family  
Parents  
Divorce  
Marriage  
Young adults

## ABSTRACT

A growing literature reveals that parental divorce and marital discord can have undesirable effects on the mental health and social well-being of children, some of which extend well into adulthood. Our study augments this body of work by focusing on the interplay of divorce and discord in shaping the religious and spiritual lives of young adults. Several discrete subgroups of young adults are identified in terms of parental marital status and degree of parents' marital conflict, and multiple religious and spiritual outcomes are considered. Data are taken from the National Survey on the Moral and Spiritual Lives of Young Adults from Divorced and Intact Families, a nationwide US telephone survey of approximately 1500 young adults ages 18–35 conducted in 2001. Findings confirm that persons raised by parents in intact, happy, low-conflict marriages tend to score higher on most religious and spiritual outcomes. However, offspring from divorced families and those from intact high-conflict families differ on some outcomes, but not others. Indicators of traditional institutional religious practices and beliefs appear more vulnerable to the effects of parental divorce and discord than personal spiritual beliefs and practices. Overall, findings reveal a rich but complex set of relationships between family background and religious and spiritual lives among young adults.

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## 1. Introduction

Divorce rates in the US rose sharply beginning in the 1960s, before leveling off in the early-mid 1980s at historically high levels (Heaton, 2002; Cherlin, 2004). These patterns have raised concerns among scholars, policymakers, and the public about the implications of parental divorce for offspring. Although much of the research on this topic has centered on outcomes during childhood and adolescence, several studies also demonstrate that the effects of parental divorce can reach well into adulthood, and there is mounting evidence that children raised in intact, two-parent families tend to fare better on a host of psychological, social, and behavioral outcomes than those raised in other types of households (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1995; Amato and Booth, 1997; Amato, 2001). More recent studies have attempted to disentangle the effects of parental divorce per se from those of parental marital discord, in an effort to determine (a) whether the observed influence

<sup>☆</sup> The authors thank the SSR editor and two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments, and Andrea Henderson for her assistance in the preparation of the manuscript.

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of divorce may be due partly to exposure to parents' marital conflict, and also (b) whether it is better for children if quarreling parents separate as opposed to remaining married (Amato et al., 1995; Booth and Amato, 2001; Yu et al., 2010).

Scholars have studied the effects of parental divorce and/or marital conflict on a wide array of child and young adult outcomes, ranging from psychological well-being, to behavior problems, to the quality of parent–child relationships (Amato and Booth, 2001; Amato, 2001; Strohschein, 2005). To date, however, few of these studies have focused on the implications of divorce and marital discord for the religious and spiritual lives of young adults. This oversight is surprising for several reasons. Parents' religious identities, practices, and beliefs are by far the strongest predictors of those of their offspring (Hoge et al., 1982; Glass et al., 1986; Sherkat, 1991). The intergenerational transmission of faith commitments has long been a central topic of research interest among sociologists of religion, and it also has important implications for religious organizations, their leaders, and their activities (Sherkat, 1991; Sherkat and Wilson, 1995; Lawton and Bures, 2001). There is a modest body of evidence showing that adolescents and young adults raised in intact, two-parent households are more likely than others to be religious, and specifically adopt the affiliations and practices of their parents (Regnerus and Uecker, 2006; Uecker et al., 2007). This is particularly the case when couples' marital happiness is high (Myers, 1996), and among offspring who report close relationships with their parents (Sherkat and Wilson, 1995). However, this literature is characterized by at least two notable limitations: (a) studies in this tradition have not explored the interplay of parental divorce and marital conflict on the religious and spiritual lives of offspring; and (b) only a handful of outcomes in this domain (e.g., affiliation and denominational "switching," religious attendance) have been examined, yielding an incomplete picture of the reach of parental marital relations into the religious and spiritual lives of young adults.

Our study contributes to this emerging body of work in several specific ways. Drawing lessons from the broader literature on the effects of parental divorce and marital quality on adjustment outcomes among offspring, we use data from an unique sample of approximately 1500 young adults (ages 18–35), evenly divided between children from intact families consisting of two biological parents, and children who experienced parental divorce prior to age 15 (Marquardt, 2005). For the purposes of this analysis, we distinguish among seven groups of young adults: (a) those raised by parents in intact, happy marriages; (b) those whose parents were in unhappy but low-conflict marriages; (c) those whose parents were in high-conflict marriages; (d) offspring of divorce whose parents experienced high levels of conflict during both pre- and post-divorce periods; (e) offspring of divorce whose parents experienced consistently low levels of conflict, both before and after the split; (f) offspring of divorce whose parents experienced high pre-divorce conflict, followed by reductions in conflict after the divorce; and (g) offspring of divorce whose parents exhibited minimal conflict preceding the divorce, but experienced elevated levels of conflict during the post-divorce period. We then estimate a series of multivariate models gauging the net differences among these divorce/marital discord categories on an array of religious and spiritual outcomes in young adulthood, including: (a) frequency of religious attendance and prayer; (b) (dis)interest in religion as a source of truth and meaning; (c) skepticism toward the religiousness and religious sincerity of parents; (d) images of God; (e) positive and negative experiences of God; and (f) religious and spiritual identities. These findings cast fresh light on the complex implications of parental marital discord and divorce on young adults' religiousness and spirituality in an era of relatively high rates of divorce, family change, and religious ferment.

## 2. Theoretical and empirical background

### 2.1. Parental discord, divorce, and children's well-being

What difference does family structure make in the lives of children and young adults? On average, children fare better in intact, two-parent families than in other types of households, particularly those characterized by divorce (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1995; Furstenberg and Kiernan, 2001; Hetherington and Kelly, 2002). This general pattern has been remarkably robust across multiple datasets, from multiple countries throughout the developed west, and across an array of indicators of psychological and social well-being (Amato and Sobolewski, 2001). This same finding also persists despite controls for a host of pre-divorce family, child, and parental personality characteristics (Simons et al., 1996; Furstenberg and Kiernan, 2001). Some researchers have incorporated sophisticated study design features to adjust for unobserved heterogeneity (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1995) and genetic similarity among siblings (Kendler et al., 1992), among other potentially confounding factors, but the observed advantages associated with intact, two-parent families persist in these studies as well. According to meta-analyses, children of divorce tend to score somewhat lower than their counterparts from non-divorced homes across most of 15 different measures of well-being, including psychological well-being, self-concept, social well-being, and quality of family relations (Amato, 2001). Although these associations are typically modest in size, they are remarkably consistent, and comparisons across meta-analyses indicate that these associations increased in magnitude during the 1990s (Amato, 2001).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Amato (2001) suggests two possible explanations for the observed increase in the negative associations between divorce and well-being during the decade of the 1990s. The first involves a shift in the nature of divorce during the 1990s, such that the more recent divorces may have occurred between couples who are moderately rather than extremely dissatisfied with their marriages. Concurrently, the delay of marriage and increase in nonmarital cohabitation may have led couples who would be poorly matched marital partners to opt for alternative arrangements, leaving those who are better matched to wed and subsequently to enjoy moderate marital satisfaction. Low-conflict divorces that end in divorce may be especially stressful to children and the proportion of these types of divorces may have increased in recent decades. The second explanation for the observed increase lies with the increasing economic disparity between married, two-parent households and single-parent households. Throughout the 1990s, dual-income families may have been in better position to take advantage of the available economic growth, as compared with single-parent families.

A smaller but growing body of the literature indicates that parental marital discord has independent deleterious effects on the well-being of the offspring (Amato and Booth, 1997; Booth and Amato, 2001; Riggio, 2004; Yu et al., 2010). Research suggests that approximately 20–25% of the children experience high levels of parental discord in their families of origin (Hetherington, 1999; Booth and Amato, 2001). Children often respond to parents' conflict with negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, and distress. Further, children in such families may be drawn into parental conflicts and forced to choose sides, thereby eroding the quality of parent–child bonds and undermining family cohesiveness (Grych and Fincham, 1990; Hetherington and Kelly, 2002). Several studies report that children in high-conflict, intact families have levels of psychological and/or social well-being that are lower than those of children in harmonious intact families, and similar to – if not lower than – those of children whose parents have divorced (Amato, 1993). Indeed, there is considerable evidence that offspring are better off on a variety of outcomes if the parents of high-conflict marriages opt to divorce instead of remaining married (Amato et al., 1995; Jekielek, 1998; Emery, 1999; Hanson, 1999). To the extent that parental marital discord represents a stressor in the lives of children, the divorce may offer release from a dysfunctional family environment and the potential for greater calm within a single-parent household (Wheaton, 1990; Strohschein, 2005; Yu et al., 2010). Indeed, the evidence suggests that the reduction in conflict can more than make up for any decrements in well-being that may result from parents' divorce.

At the same time, however, children from homes characterized by only modest parental discord whose parents subsequently divorce may suffer greater negative consequences compared to those of low-conflict parents who remain married. Amato (2002) theorizes that children in low-to-moderate conflict families may view their parents' marriages as “good enough,” and thus may experience added difficulty adjusting when the marriage unexpectedly (from the children's perspective) comes to an end. Overall, the most recent and productive line of research in this area recognizes that parental divorce and parental marital discord may have contingent as well as additive effects on a wide range of outcomes among children, some of which can extend well into the adult years.

## 2.2. Family background and the intergenerational transmission of religiousness and spirituality

Although investigators have explored a broad range of outcomes that may be influenced by family structure and parents' marital quality, surprisingly few of these researchers have focused on young adults' religious and spiritual lives. Yet prior theoretical and empirical work suggests that this connection could be quite important. At least one important reason why parents' marital discord and divorce could impact young adults' religiousness and spirituality may involve the erosion of close relationships between parents and children under these stressful conditions (Zill et al., 1993; Amato and Booth, 1997; Silverstein and Bengtson, 1997; Emery, 1999; Amato and Sobolewski, 2001). Several specific studies have linked these aspects of family background with the religious lives of young adults. First, in the analyses of three waves of data from the Youth-Parent Socialization Study, Sherkat and Wilson (1995) found that young adults who felt closer to their parents in the baseline survey were less likely to drop out of organized religion altogether than those who reported lower levels of intergenerational closeness. Feelings of closeness also predicted an increased likelihood of switching to more liberal denominations, and a reduced likelihood of moving to more conservative denominations. Second, Myers (1996) used data from a longitudinal survey of US households conducted over 12 years (1980–92) to investigate the determinants of the intergenerational transmission of religiosity, as measured by an index consisting of six types of organizational and non-organizational religious practices, ranging from attendance at religious services to reading religious materials. He found interactions of parental religiosity with (a) parental marital happiness and (b) whether the offspring was being raised in a stepfamily. Based on the significance and direction of these contingent patterns, Myers (1996) concluded: “Religiosity inheritance is enhanced if offspring are raised by both biological parents who have high marital happiness” (p. 864). Third, across two waves of the National Survey of Families and Households, Lawton and Bures (2001) found that regardless of the faith in which they were raised, respondents who experienced parental divorce during childhood were more likely to abandon organized religion during adulthood. In addition, offspring of divorce who were raised Catholic or conservative Protestant were disproportionately likely to switch their allegiance to other religious denominations than to remain in their faith of origin. Fourth, among adolescents in waves 1, 2, and 3 of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (widely known as “Add Health”), those raised in single-parent families and other non-intact family structures were much more likely than those raised in intact, two-parent families to report large decreases in religious salience and the frequency of religious attendance, and to disaffiliate from organized religion entirely (Regnerus and Uecker, 2006; Uecker et al., 2007).

Although these findings are intriguing and important, most of the studies discussed above were designed to explore a wide array of possible factors affecting trajectories of adolescent and young adult religiousness. By contrast, two more recent studies by Zhai and colleagues (2007, 2008) have focused squarely on identifying and explaining the role of parental divorce. Briefly, these studies have used data from the National Survey on the Moral and Spiritual Lives of Young Adults, a cross-sectional sample consisting of roughly equal numbers of young adults ages 18–35 who experienced parental divorce prior to age 15, and young adults who were raised in intact, two-parent families (Marquardt, 2005). This line of investigation reveals that offspring of divorce report attending religious services substantially less often in young adulthood than their counterparts from intact, two-parent families. Further, building on earlier research on the growth of personalized, non-organizational spirituality among Baby Boomers and subsequent cohorts (Roof, 1993, 2000), Zhai et al. (2008) show that children of divorce are much more prone to identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious” than those from two-parent families, raising the possibility that changes in family structure may underlie the widely-remarked growth in this identity category (Zinnbauer et al., 1997, 1999; Marler and Hadaway, 2002; Shahabi et al., 2002).

Moreover, Zhai et al. (2007) examine several possible explanations for the link between parental divorce and lower religious attendance, focusing on two perspectives with roots in the classic social learning theories (SLT) of Bandura (1977, 2003). First, spiritual modeling (SM) is based on the notion that young people grow spiritually by emulating the life or conduct of spiritual exemplars. These are typically parents or perhaps other family members (e.g., grandparents), but other adults may also serve as spiritual exemplars, including prominent figures in the religious community or the civic arena, or even historical or scriptural characters or public figures. The central tenet of the SM perspective is that young people learn spiritually relevant skills or behaviors by observing others whom they admire, and who serve as valuable role models during the spiritual learning process (King and Mueller, 2004; King et al., 2002; Regnerus et al., 2004). Second, the spiritual capital (SC) approach emphasizes direct spiritual interactions and social processes, rather than observational learning. This perspective suggests that young people learn about religion and spirituality from the intervention of parents or other influential adults, who can assume direct roles in active religious training (e.g., in sharing of spiritual insights, encouraging young people to focus on spiritual matters, and so on). Studies have found support for both SM and SC perspectives in predicting individual-level variations in adolescents' and young adults' religiousness (King and Mueller, 2004; Regnerus et al., 2004). However, Zhai and colleagues (2007) found that the link between parental divorce and lower religious attendance can be explained by the sharply lower levels of paternal involvement in the religious socialization (SC) of the offspring during the post-divorce period.<sup>2</sup>

### 2.3. Other influences on young adults' religiousness and spirituality

In order to assess the implications of parental marital discord and divorce for young adults' religious and spiritual lives, it is important to control for possible confounding variables. Of particular importance are religious upbringing and adult relationship status. Briefly, as we noted earlier, parents have a potent influence on young adults' religiousness (Hoge et al., 1982; Glass et al., 1986; Myers, 1996). More religiously engaged parents and households are more inclined to transmit religious identities, practices, and attitudes to the progeny, as are those affiliated with more conservative religious groups and traditions, such as fundamentalist and evangelical Protestants or Mormons (Latter-day Saints) (Sherkat, 1991; Sherkat and Wilson, 1995). At the same time, parental religious involvement and religious similarity are positively linked with marital happiness (Wilcox and Wolfinger, 2008), and inversely associated with marital conflict (Ellison et al., 1999; Curtis and Ellison, 2002) and marital dissolution (Vaaler et al., 2009). Therefore, it is crucial to incorporate adjustments for indicators of religious upbringing into any analysis of young adults' religiousness and spirituality.

Further, the religious involvement of young adults tends to vary according to their relationship and family status. Specifically, those who are married, and especially those who have children, are more prone to participate in religious and spiritual pursuits, a pattern that appears to reflect both causality and selection (Wilson and Sherkat, 1994; Sherkat and Wilson, 1995; Stolzenberg et al., 1995). By contrast, those who opt for cohabitation – by its nature, typically a more transient type of relationship – tend to be less religious at the outset, and the experience of cohabitation erodes religiousness over time (Thornton et al., 1992). Such adult relationship variables could confound the links between parental marital discord and divorce and young adult religiousness. Offspring of divorced or conflictual marriages are more prone to cohabit (e.g., Cherlin et al., 1995) and also exhibit greater risk of marital disruption in adulthood (Glenn and Kramer, 1987; Amato and Booth, 1997), compared with their counterparts from intact two-parent households. Among young adults, rates of cohabitation and timing of marriage also differ by religious background (e.g., Xu et al., 2005).

Finally, young adults' religiousness and spirituality are likely to vary according to gender, race/ethnicity, and age. By virtually all conventional indicators, women are typically more engaged in this domain than men, and African Americans and other minorities are more religious than non-Hispanic whites (Myers, 1996; Regnerus and Uecker, 2006). Age bears a complex association with various dimensions of religiousness during young adulthood. On the one hand, institutional involvement may increase during this stage of the life cycle, particularly when young adults wed and have children (e.g., Stolzenberg et al., 1995). On the other hand, there has been some evidence that more personal religious indicators (e.g., prayer) may decline during the young adult years (Peacock and Poloma, 1999; Koenig et al., 2008).

### 2.4. The present study

This study extends previous research by attempting to disentangle the effects of parental marital discord and divorce on various facets of young adults' religious and spiritual lives. Briefly, if the experience of parental divorce per se influences religious and spiritual outcomes within this population, then we expect that young adults raised by parents in all types of intact marriages – happy, unhappy but low-conflict, and high-conflict – will have higher levels of religiousness and spirituality,

<sup>2</sup> Specifically, Zhai et al. (2007) found that religious socialization efforts by both parents enhanced levels of religiousness among young adults. However, children of divorce differed little from their counterparts from two-parent families in levels of maternal religious socialization. By contrast, gaps in paternal religious socialization between the two groups were quite large, and controlling for paternal religious socialization reduced the estimated net effect of parental divorce to statistical insignificance. One interesting possibility here – which has not been tested to our knowledge – is that experiences of marital discord and divorce may reshape parents' religious identities, which in turn affect their inclinations to participate in efforts to cultivate religious faith and allegiance in their children. This warrants attention in future studies.

lower levels of skepticism toward parents' religiousness, and more favorable experiences and images of God than their counterparts whose parents divorced before they reached age 15.

On the other hand, if parents' marital discord also influences these outcomes, then: (a) Young adults raised by parents in intact happy marriages will report higher levels of religiousness and spirituality, less skepticism concerning parental religion, and more favorable experiences and images of God than others. (b) Offspring whose parents experienced high-conflict divorces (i.e., those with high levels of conflict before and after the split) may fare especially poorly on these outcomes. (c) Offspring from low-conflict divorce might be expected to exhibit greater religiousness and spirituality, less skepticism toward parents' religiousness, and more favorable experiences and images of God than those young adults raised by parents in intact, high-conflict marriages.

However, if Amato (2002) is correct, then young adults whose parents divorced in the absence of significant marital discord – i.e., marriages that may have been “good enough” from the perspective of the offspring and seemingly ended without a clear rationale – may be expected to exhibit lower religiousness and spirituality, greater skepticism of parents' religion, and less favorable experiences and images of God than other young adults, even those who experienced higher levels of parental marital discord.

### 3. Data

The data for this study come from the National Survey on the Moral and Spiritual Lives of Young Adults from Divorced and Intact Families (hereafter NSMS), which was conducted by the survey firm of Schulman, Ronca, and Bucuvalas, Inc. (SRBI) for the Institute for American Values in New York City in 2001. The study was designed and directed by Norval Glenn and Elizabeth Marquardt; for additional study details and results see Marquardt (2005). The NSMS is a nationwide telephone survey of 1506 young adults ages 18–35, 751 from divorced families and 755 from intact families. None of the respondents had experienced the death of a parent before they were 18 years old, nor were any of them adopted. Participants from intact families had two biological parents who married before the respondent was born, stayed married, and were still married at the time of the survey unless one or both of them had died. Respondents who were from divorced families had experienced parental divorce before they were 15 years old. These young people continued to maintain contact with both parents, seeing each a minimum of once a year in the years following the divorce. Age 15 was used as the cutoff (rather than age 18, the age of legal adulthood) to insure that the offspring of divorce spent at least some significant time living with one or more of their parents during the post-divorce period.

#### 3.1. Dependent variables: religiousness and spirituality

We investigate the effects of parental divorce and marital quality on an array of outcome measures tapping facets of young adults' religious and spiritual experience. First, we measure frequency of religious attendance via responses to the following item: “Aside from weddings and funerals, how often do you attend religious services? Response categories range from “never or almost never” (1) to “almost every week” (4). Regularity of prayer activity is gauged in terms of answers to this question: “In your life now, which of the following best describes your practice of prayer?” Response categories range from “I never pray” (1) to “Prayer is a regular part of my life” (4). Young adults were also asked to compare their religiousness with those of their parents, measured in terms of agreement with the following statements: (a) “I think I am more religious now than my mother ever was.” (b) “I think I am more religious now than my father ever was.” These are analyzed as individual items. Because each of these is an ordinal item, we use ordered logistic regression techniques in the multivariate analyses that follow.

We also use the responses to two items to measure interest in religion as a source of existential meaning. Specifically, respondents were asked about the following statements: (a) “Religion does not seem to address the important issues in my life.” (b) “I believe I can find the ultimate truth without help from a religion.” Response categories range from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (4). Our measure of religious disinterest is the sum of these items ( $\alpha = .75$ ,  $r = .60$ ); individuals who were missing valid answers to either question were dropped from these analyses, which were conducted using ordered logistic regression techniques.

To gauge respondents' positive experiences with God, we develop a scale based on the agreement with the following statements: (a) “I sometimes feel the presence of God.” (b) “I feel like a member of God's family.” (c) “When I have needed help God has been there for me.” Response categories ranged from (1) strongly disagree to (4) strongly agree. Our measure is the mean score on these items ( $\alpha = .89$ ). The absence of doubts about God is measured via levels of disagreement with the following items: (a) “Because there is so much suffering in the world I find it hard to believe in God.” (b) “When I think about the bad things that have happened in my life I find it hard to believe in a God who cares.” The original responses ranged from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (4), but these were reverse-coded for the purposes of our analyses, so that higher scores reflect fewer doubts about God. Our measure is the average response to these recoded items ( $\alpha = .80$ ,  $r = .66$ ). We treat these two outcomes as continuous variables, and we use OLS regression in the analyses that follow.

In addition, respondents were asked several questions about their perceptions of God's qualities, via the following question: “If you had to describe God's qualities . . . would you say that God is \_\_\_?” Response categories range from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (4). We construct a scale to measure positive God images, based on respondent's level of



agreement that God: (a) is all powerful; (b) is caring; (c) loves us unconditionally; (d) exists; (e) is just; (f) is present; (g) is compassionate; (h) is like a friend; (i) is like a father; and (j) is forgiving. The Cronbach's alpha for this scale is .93, and we use OLS regression to analyze this outcome. In addition, we are particularly interested in whether parental divorce and marital conflict may influence the tendency of young adults to perceive God as "angry." Therefore, we also analyze this response as a single item, using ordered logistic regression as our modeling technique.

Finally, respondents were asked to rate their overall religiousness and spirituality, via two questions: (a) "How religious do you currently consider yourself to be?" (b) "How spiritual do you currently consider yourself to be?" Responses to each item are "very," "fairly," "slightly," and "not at all." We recode these items, distinguishing between respondents who characterize themselves as "very" or "fairly" religious or spiritual vs. those who indicate that they are "slightly" or "not at all" religious or spiritual. Using this recoding, we classify each respondent into one of four mutually exclusive groups: (a) religious and spiritual; (b) religious, not spiritual; (c) spiritual, not religious; (d) neither religious nor spiritual. We treat the modal category – religious and spiritual – as the reference category and analyze this polytomous response variable using multinomial logistic regression techniques. This coding follows the practice of several previous studies that have explored the "spiritual but not religious" category in US samples (Zinnbauer et al., 1997; Marler and Hadaway, 2002; Shahabi et al., 2002).

### 3.2. Key independent variables

To disentangle the effects of parental divorce and marital discord on the religiousness and spirituality of young adults, we classify respondents into seven mutually exclusive groups: (a) those raised in happy marriages with low levels of parental marital conflict ( $n = 310$ ); (b) those whose parents remained in intact, unhappy but low-conflict marriages ( $n = 205$ ); (c) those whose parents endured high-conflict unions ( $n = 192$ ); (d) children of divorce whose parents experienced high levels of conflict before and after the split ( $n = 258$ ); (e) those whose parents' high levels of marital discord were reduced following divorce ( $n = 172$ ); (f) offspring of divorce who do not recall significant levels of pre-divorce marital conflict, but whose parents experienced elevated discord during the post-divorce period ( $n = 109$ ); and (g) offspring of divorce who recall low levels of pre- and post-divorce parental marital discord ( $n = 216$ ). A small number of cases ( $n = 48$ ) could not be classified into any one of these groups and were dropped from the remainder of the analyses. They include the grouping of respondents who report growing up in intact and happy, but high-conflict, families, which is too small ( $n = 43$ , 2.7% of sample) to permit reliable analyses.

For children from two-parent families, parents' marital happiness was assessed in terms of responses to the following question: "How would you rate your parents' marriage overall during the years that you lived with them? Response categories are "very happy," "pretty happy," or "not too happy." For the purposes of our study, respondents who indicated that their parents' marriage was "very happy" were placed in the happy marriage category; all others were coded as unhappy. Parents' marital discord was gauged via responses to the following item: "When you were living at home with your parents, how much conflict did your parents have? Take into account such things as quarreling, shouting, and physically fighting." Respondents indicating that their parents experienced "a lot" or "some" conflict were classified in the high-conflict category; those who answered "not much" or "almost none" were classified in the low-conflict category. Those respondents who indicated that they were "too young to remember" were placed in the low-conflict category in our analyses, since this response implies that any conflict was not severe enough to leave a lasting impression on them. Ancillary analyses (not shown) confirm that on most of the outcomes examined in this study, persons who were "too young to remember" are more like low-conflict than high-conflict respondents.

For children of divorce, pre-divorce conflict was gauged via responses to the following item: "In the year or so before your parents separated, how much conflict did they have? Take into account such things as quarreling, shouting and physically fighting." Response categories range from "almost none" (1) to "a lot" (4). Those respondents indicating that their parents experienced "some" or "a lot" of conflict were classified in the high-conflict category. Post-divorce conflict is measured via responses to the following question: "In the two or three years after your parents divorced, how much conflict did they have?" Answers range from "almost none" (1) to "a lot" (4); once again, respondents answering "some" or "a lot" were classified in the high-conflict category, and those persons who answered "too young to remember" were presumed to have experienced little or no meaningful conflict.

### 3.3. Control variables

In order to assess the effects of parental divorce and marital quality on young adults' religious and spiritual lives, it is important to include statistical controls for a range of potentially confounding variables. As we noted earlier, it is possible that parental religiousness may be linked with marital quality and marital stability, as well as young adults' religiousness. Therefore, we adjust for several indicators of childhood religious upbringing. First, respondents were asked: "What religion, if any were you raised in?" Based on responses to this, and to a subsequent probe requesting Protestants to specify their denomination of origin, we created a series of dummy variables to identify young adults who were raised: (a) with no religion; (b) Catholic; (c) conservative (i.e., fundamentalist or evangelical) Protestant (e.g., Southern Baptist, Pentecostal or Holiness, Assemblies of God; Church of Christ); (d) Mormon/Latter Day Saints; or (e) other religion. The reference category in our analyses consists of young adults who were raised as mainline Protestants (e.g., Episcopal, United Methodist, Presbyterian Church USA). Our coding of conservative vs. mainline Protestant groups follows the scheme recommended by Steensland and colleagues (2000).

We also control for retrospective assessments of the peak levels of religious attendance and prayer in childhood. Specifically, respondents were asked whether they attended religious services when they were a child. Those answering in the affirmative were then asked: "... Thinking about the period in your childhood when you attended services most often, how often did you attend?" Responses range from "almost never" (1) to (4) "one to three times a month or more." Respondents were also asked whether they prayed when they were a child, and those providing affirmative answers were asked: "Thinking about the period in your childhood when you prayed most often, how often did you pray?" Response categories range from "hardly ever" (1) to "every day" (4).

Because children of divorce and those from conflictual families may be more likely to cohabit, and are also more prone to separate and divorce, than those from intact families, we control for respondents' marital or relationship status (1 = married, 1 = cohabiting, 1 = divorced or separated, vs. 0 = not cohabiting and never married), and for the presence of children in the household (1 = yes, 0 = no). Finally, our models control for personal sociodemographic characteristics, such as: gender (1 = female, 0 = male); race/ethnicity (1 = nonwhite, 0 = non-Hispanic white); age (measured in years); education (7-category ordinal scale; 1 = 8 years or less, 7 = graduate school); and household income (5-category ordinal scale; 1 = under \$25K, 5 = \$100K or more).

#### 4. Results

Descriptive statistics on all variables used in these analyses are presented in Table 1. Roughly 21% of NSMS respondents were raised in what we have termed intact, happy low-conflict families, while another 14% grew up in intact, unhappy low-conflict families, and 13% came from intact, high-conflict families. Offspring from highly conflictual divorces – i.e., those with high-conflict during both pre- and post-divorce periods – make up approximately 18% of the NSMS sample, while another

**Table 1**  
Descriptive statistics.

Variable	N	Mean	St.dev.	Range
Intact happy, low-conflict marriage	1462	.21	–	0–1
Intact unhappy, low-conflict marriage	1462	.14	–	0–1
Intact unhappy, high-conflict marriage	1462	.13	–	0–1
Divorce, high-conflict before and after	1462	.18	–	0–1
Divorce, high-conflict before only	1462	.12	–	0–1
Divorce, low-conflict before and after	1462	.15	–	0–1
Divorce, low-conflict before only	1462	.07	–	0–1
Religious attendance	1508	2.51	1.17	1–4
Frequency of prayer	1491	3.17	1.03	1–4
Religious disinterest	1480	4.22	2.02	2–8
More religious than mother	1490	1.80	1.04	1–4
More religious than father	1481	2.20	1.19	1–4
Doubt mother's religious sincerity	1479	1.49	.86	1–4
Doubt father's religious sincerity	1461	1.69	.98	1–4
Positive experiences of God	1494	3.29	.85	1–4
Absence of doubts about God	1493	3.49	.79	1–4
Positive God images	1497	3.59	.65	1–4
Image of God as angry	1467	1.56	.87	1–4
Religious and spiritual	1432	.57	–	0–1
Religious but not spiritual	1432	.05	–	0–1
Spiritual but not religious	1432	.17	–	0–1
Neither religious nor spiritual	1432	.21	–	0–1
Raised no religion	1469	.12	–	0–1
Raised conservative Protestant	1469	.30	–	0–1
Raised Catholic	1469	.29	–	0–1
Raised Mormon	1469	.03	–	0–1
Raised mainline Protestant	1469	.16	–	0–1
Raised other religion	1469	.09	–	0–1
Peak attendance in childhood	1504	3.14	1.13	1–4
Peak prayer in childhood	1510	2.98	1.16	1–4
Female	1510	.58	–	0–1
Nonwhite	1510	.17	–	0–1
Age	1504	28.77	4.61	18–35
Married	1504	.57	–	0–1
Cohabiting	1504	.05	–	0–1
Divorced or separated	1504	.06	–	0–1
Education	1502	5.02	1.42	1–7
Household income	1434	2.87	1.20	1–5

12% of respondents experienced parental divorces in which high levels of conflict prior to the divorce were reduced following the split. For the remaining 22% of NSMS respondents, parental divorces were not preceded by significant conflict among parents – at least, not that the offspring could recall. Roughly two-thirds of these young adults (15% of NSMS sample) recalled little or no conflict in the post-divorce phase, while a relatively small proportion of the NSMS respondents (7.5%) reported that levels of perceived parental conflict were greater in the aftermath of divorce than during the pre-divorce period.

Turning to the young adults' religious and spiritual variables that will be treated as outcomes in this study, we find that the average respondent attends religious services roughly once a month (2.51 on a 1–4 metric) and for many respondents, prayer is a regular part of their lives (mean of 3.17 on a 1–4 metric). In general, religious disinterest seems relatively low in the overall sample of young adults (4.22 on a 2–8 metric), suggesting that many respondents believe that religion is a source of existential meaning and ultimate truth. Levels of skepticism regarding parents' religiousness are relatively low. Respondents are disinclined to believe that they are “more religious than [their] mother ever was” (mean of 1.80 on a 1–4 metric) or to doubt the sincerity of their mother's religion (mean of 1.49 on a 1–4 metric). Skepticism toward paternal religiousness tends to be somewhat higher; on (mean scores of 2.20 and 1.69, respectively).

The average respondent tends to report high levels of positive experience with God (3.29 on a 1–4 metric) and minimal negative experiences of God (3.48 on a 1–4 metric). Positive images of God (e.g., loving, forgiving, and all-powerful) are widespread in the NSMS sample (mean score of 3.59 on a 1–4 metric), while images of God as “angry” are much less common (1.56 on a 1–4 metric). Finally, a majority of respondents (57%) report being both religious and spiritual; only 5% are religious but not spiritual, while 17% identify as spiritual but not religious, and the remaining 21% are neither religious nor spiritual.

With regard to childhood religious upbringing, the largest segment of NSMS respondents were raised in conservative Protestant faiths (30%), followed by Catholic (29%), mainline Protestant (16%), no religion (12%), other faiths (9%), and Mormon (3%). Levels of childhood religious attendance (3.14 on a 1–4 metric) and prayer (2.98 on a 1–4 metric) were relatively high. The average age of NSMS respondents is 28.77; majorities are female (58%) and non-Hispanic white (83%). Most respondents (60%) were married, while only small percentages were cohabiting (5%) or divorced or separated (6%) at the time of the NSMS survey. Nearly three in five respondents (57%) have children. According to the figures in Table 1, the average respondent has completed some college but lacks a four-year (BA or BS) degree, and has an annual household income of roughly \$40K.

Tables 2–5 present the results of multivariate ordered logistic regression models estimating the net effects of parental divorce and marital quality on various facets of young adults' religiousness. In the models displayed in the table, five of the family background (divorce/discord) groups – each of which is identified with a dummy variable – are compared with a reference category. Two sets of analyses are performed for each religious/spiritual outcome variable. In one set of analyses, the reference category consists of young adults from intact, high-conflict families, which are presumably the most problematic of the intact family groupings. In the second set of analyses, the comparison group consists of young adults from divorced families in which levels of conflict among parents were consistently low, both before and after the split. To conserve space, the parameter estimates for covariates are not tabled, and their estimated net effects are not discussed in the text, but further information is available from the authors.

Table 2 focuses on young adults' frequency of religious attendance and personal prayer, as well as their levels of religious disinterest. Several findings are particularly noteworthy. First, young adults from intact happy families attend religious services much more often than their counterparts from intact high-conflict families; indeed, the cumulative odds of religious attendance are more than 50% greater (OR = 1.58,  $p < .01$ ) for the former group. However, few other significant differences involving offspring from intact high-conflict families emerge here. On average, young adults from intact happy families

**Table 2**

Estimated net effects of parental divorce and marital conflict on young adults attendance, prayer, and religious disinterest: ordered logistic regression.

	ATTEND	PRAYER	NOEXIS
Intact, happy low-conflict	1.58 <sup>**aaa</sup>	1.25	.54 <sup>***aa</sup>
Intact, unhappy, low-conflict	1.27 <sup>a</sup>	1.33	.83
Divorce, high-conflict before and after	.91	1.37	.87
Divorce, high-conflict before only	.68 <sup>+</sup>	1.10	1.25 <sup>a+</sup>
Divorce, low-conflict before and after	.81	1.37	.89
Divorce, low-conflict before only	1.18	1.45	1.06
Intact, unhappy, high-conflict [Ref.]	1.00	1.00	1.00
N	1341	1332	1319

Notes: Cell entries are odds ratios. ATTEND = frequency of current attendance; PRAYER = frequency of current prayer; and NOEXIS = disinterest in religion. All models control for: female, age, nonwhite, raised no religion, raised conservative Protestant, raised Catholic, raised LDS, raised other religion, peak attendance in childhood, peak prayer frequency in childhood, married, cohabiting, divorced or separated, children, education, and household income.

<sup>\*\*</sup>  $p < .01$ , difference from unhappy high conflict marriages.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup>  $p < .001$ , difference from unhappy high conflict marriages.

<sup>a</sup>  $p < .05$ , difference from divorce, low-conflict before and after.

<sup>aa</sup>  $p < .01$ , difference from divorce, low-conflict before and after.

<sup>aaa</sup>  $p < .001$ , difference from divorce, low-conflict before and after.

<sup>+</sup>  $p < .05$ , difference from unhappy high conflict marriages.

<sup>a+</sup>  $p < .10$ , difference from divorce, low-conflict before and after.



**Table 3**

Estimated net effects of parental divorce and marital conflict on young adults perceptions of parental religious sincerity and relative religiousness: ordered logistic regression.

	MOREMA	MOREPA	MADBT	PADBT
Intact, happy, low-conflict	0.48 <sup>***,aaa</sup>	0.35 <sup>***,aaa</sup>	0.25 <sup>***,aaa</sup>	0.21 <sup>***,aaa</sup>
Intact, unhappy, low-conflict	1.00	0.86	0.65 <sup>*</sup>	0.61 <sup>*</sup>
Divorce, high-conflict before and after	2.09 <sup>***,aaa</sup>	1.61 <sup>*,aa</sup>	1.45 <sup>*,aaa</sup>	1.62 <sup>*,aaa</sup>
Divorce, high-conflict before only	1.31	1.62 <sup>*,a</sup>	1.05 <sup>aa</sup>	1.27 <sup>a</sup>
Divorce, low-conflict before and after	1.01	1.01	0.58 <sup>*</sup>	0.79
Divorce, low-conflict before only	1.53 <sup>+</sup>	1.18	1.19 <sup>aa</sup>	1.15
Intact, unhappy high-conflict [Ref.]	1.00	1.00	1.00 <sup>a</sup>	1.00
N	1325	1318	1324	1318

Notes: Cell entries are odds ratios. MOREMA = R more religious than mother ever was; MOREPA = R more religious than father ever was; MADBT = R doubts mother's religious sincerity; and PADBT = R doubts father's religious sincerity.

All models control for: female, age, nonwhite, raised no religion, raised conservative Protestant, raised Catholic, raised LDS, raised other religion, peak attendance in childhood, peak prayer frequency in childhood, married, cohabiting, divorced or separated, children, education, and household income.

<sup>+</sup>  $p < .05$ , difference from intact, unhappy, high-conflict.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup>  $p < .001$ , difference from intact, unhappy, high-conflict.

<sup>a</sup>  $p < .05$ , difference from divorce, low-conflict before and after.

<sup>aa</sup>  $p < .01$ , difference from divorce, low-conflict before and after.

<sup>aaa</sup>  $p < .001$ , difference from divorce, low-conflict before and after.

<sup>\*</sup>  $p < .10$ , difference from intact, unhappy, high-conflict.

**Table 4**

Estimated net effects of parental divorce and marital conflict on God images, God experiences, and doubts about God.

	POSGODc	ANGRYb	POSGODEXc	NODOUBTc
Intact, happy, low-conflict	.058 <sup>+</sup>	.63 <sup>*</sup>	.057 <sup>+</sup>	.129 <sup>***</sup>
Intact, unhappy, low-conflict	.079 <sup>+</sup>	.72	.061 <sup>+</sup>	.058 <sup>+</sup>
Divorce, high-conflict before and after	.031	1.04	.053	.030 <sup>+</sup>
Divorce, high-conflict before only	.052 <sup>+</sup>	.91	.040	.010 <sup>a</sup>
Divorce, low-conflict before and after	.043	.65 <sup>+</sup>	.059 <sup>+</sup>	.083 <sup>+</sup>
Divorce, low-conflict before only	.042	1.03	.046	.069 <sup>+</sup>
Intact, unhappy, high-conflict [Ref.]	–	1.00 <sup>++</sup>	– <sup>a*</sup>	– <sup>a</sup>
N	1326	1308	1329	1329

Notes: "b" = cell entries are odds ratios from ordered logistic regression models, and "c" = cell entries are standardized Betas from OLS regression models. POSGOD = image of God as positive; ANGRY = image of God as angry; POSGODEX = positive experiences of God; and NODOUBT = absence of doubts about God.

All models control for: female, age, nonwhite, raised no religion, raised conservative Protestant, raised Catholic, raised LDS, raised other religion, peak attendance in childhood, peak prayer frequency in childhood, married, cohabiting, divorced or separated, children, education, and household income.

<sup>+</sup>  $p < .05$ , difference from intact, unhappy, high-conflict.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup>  $p < .001$ , difference from intact, unhappy, high-conflict.

<sup>a</sup>  $p < .05$ , difference from divorce, low-conflict before and after.

<sup>\*</sup>  $p < .10$ , difference from intact, unhappy, high-conflict.

<sup>a\*</sup>  $p < .10$ , difference from divorce, low-conflict before and after.

and those from intact unhappy families attend services more often than offspring from low-conflict divorces ( $p < .001$  and  $p < .01$ , respectively). Second, levels of religious disinterest are dramatically lower among young adults from intact happy families as compared with those from intact high-conflict families (OR = .54,  $p < .001$ ); a similar pattern emerges when this group is contrasted with offspring from low-conflict divorces ( $p < .01$ ). Third, there is also an interesting pattern involving children from divorces in which high levels of pre-divorce parental conflict were reduced following the split: (a) Attendance levels are marginally lower for this group than for offspring from intact high-conflict marriages (OR = .68,  $p < .10$ ); and (b) levels of religious disinterest are higher among this group than among children from consistently low-conflict divorces ( $p < .10$ ). Fourth, these analyses reveal no effects of family background on the frequency of young adults' current prayer activity.

In Table 3, turning to young adults' skepticism regarding their parents' religiousness, several intriguing patterns surface. First, offspring from intact happy families are dramatically less inclined than the offspring from intact high-conflict families to: (a) doubt the sincerity of mother's religion (OR = .25,  $p < .001$ ) or father's religion (OR = .21,  $p < .001$ ); or (b) to believe that they are more religious than their mothers (OR = .48,  $p < .001$ ) or their fathers (OR = .35,  $p < .001$ ) ever were. Young adults from intact happy families are also much less skeptical of their parents' religion – at least, measured with these items – than their counterparts from families with low-conflict divorces (all differences  $p < .01$  or greater). Second, young adults who experienced high-conflict divorces growing up – i.e., those with high levels of discord during both pre- and post-divorce periods – hold much more negative views of parental religion than either of the comparison groups in our analyses. Specifically, they are more doubtful of their mother's religious sincerity (OR = 1.45,  $p < .10$ ) and their father's religious sincerity (OR = 1.62,  $p < .05$ ), and they tend to believe that they are more religious than their mother ever was (OR = 2.09,  $p < .001$ )

**Table 5**

Estimated net effects of parental divorce and marital quality on religious and spiritual identities of young adults: multinomial logistic regression ( $N = 1273$ ).

	RNS	SNR	NRNS
Intact, happy, low-conflict	.73	.31 <sup>***,aaa</sup>	.57 <sup>+</sup>
Intact, unhappy, low-conflict	.20 <sup>*,a*</sup>	.52 <sup>*,a</sup>	.76
Divorce, high-conflict before and after	.80	.72	.74
Divorce, high-conflict before only	.70	1.46	1.19
Divorce, low-conflict before and after	.63	.98	.69
Divorce, low-conflict before only	.66	.97	.94
Intact, unhappy, high-conflict [Ref.]	1.00	1.00	1.00

Notes: Cell entries are odds ratios. RNS = religious, not spiritual; SNR = spiritual, not religious; NRNS = neither religious nor spiritual; vs. religious and spiritual.

All models control for: female, age, nonwhite, raised no religion, raised conservative Protestant, raised Catholic, raised LDS, raised other religion, peak childhood attendance, peak childhood prayer frequency, married, cohabiting, divorced or separated, children, education, household income.

<sup>\*</sup>  $p < .05$ , difference from intact, unhappy, high-conflict.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup>  $p < .001$ , difference from intact, unhappy, high-conflict marriage.

<sup>a</sup>  $p < .05$ , difference from divorce, low-conflict before and after.

<sup>aaa</sup>  $p < .001$ , difference from divorce, low-conflict before and after.

<sup>+</sup>  $p < .10$ , difference from intact, unhappy, high-conflict.

<sup>a\*</sup>  $p < .10$ , difference from divorce, low-conflict before and after.

and more religious than their father ever was ( $OR = 1.61$ ,  $p < .05$ ). These young adults from high-conflict divorces are also much more skeptical about parents' religiousness than their counterparts from consistently non-conflictual divorces (all differences  $p < .01$  or greater). Third, offspring from families in which high pre-divorce conflict was diminished following the split are only distinctive in a few regards: (a) They are inclined to believe that they are more religious than their fathers ever were, compared with offspring from intact high-conflict families ( $OR = 1.62$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and with offspring from consistently low-conflict divorces ( $p < .05$ ). (b) They are more doubtful about the sincerity of mother's religion ( $p < .01$ ) and father's religion ( $p < .05$ ) than offspring of consistently low-conflict divorces. Fourth, compared with their counterparts from intact high-conflict families, the offspring from divorces in which parental conflict increased from low to high levels following the split are marginally more likely ( $OR = 1.53$ ,  $p < .10$ ) to believe that they are more religious than their mothers ever were. They are also more doubtful of the sincerity of their mother's religion than young adults who experienced consistently low-conflict divorces while growing up ( $p < .01$ ).

Table 4 displays the results of multivariate ordered logit and OLS regression models gauging the net effects of parental divorce and marital quality on young adults' images of God and positive and negative experiences vis-a-vis God. Findings for these outcomes appear much weaker than those presented in Tables 2 and 3. First, compared to persons raised in intact high-conflict families, those who grew up in intact happy families express somewhat more positive God images ( $\beta = .058$ ,  $p < .10$ ) and more positive experiences of God ( $\beta = .057$ ,  $p < .10$ ); however, both patterns are only marginally statistically significant. They are marginally less prone to view God as angry ( $OR = .63$ ,  $p < .10$ ), and they are much less prone to report doubts about God ( $\beta = .129$ ,  $p < .001$ ). None of these differences surface when young adults from intact happy families are compared with those who experienced consistently low-conflict parental divorces. Second, respondents from intact unhappy families report more positive experiences of God ( $\beta = .061$ ,  $p < .05$ ) than those from intact high-conflict families. In a marginally significant finding, they also report somewhat fewer doubts about God ( $\beta = .058$ ,  $p < .10$ ). Third, compared with respondents from intact, high-conflict families, those in which there were high levels of pre-divorce conflict declined following the split: (a) report fewer doubts about God ( $\beta = .083$ ,  $p < .05$ ); and (b) are marginally less prone to experience God as angry ( $OR = .65$ ,  $p < .10$ ). Fourth, offspring from consistently low-conflict divorces report fewer doubts about God ( $\beta = .083$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and marginally more positive experiences of God ( $\beta = .059$ ,  $p < .10$ ), than those from intact high-conflict families, although these groups do not differ on the other outcomes in Table 4.

Other interesting differences surface among the offspring of divorce themselves. For example, the offspring from consistently high-conflict divorces are more inclined to view God as angry than those from consistently low-conflict divorces ( $p < .05$ ), and also marginally more prone to report more doubts about God ( $p < .10$ ). In addition, compared to those young adults who experienced consistently low-conflict divorces, their counterparts whose parents exhibited low levels of conflict prior to the split but elevated conflict in the post-divorce period are marginally more prone to experience God as angry ( $p < .10$ ), while those from divorces with high pre-divorce conflict and reduced post-divorce conflict tended to report more doubts about God ( $p < .05$ ).

Finally, in Table 5 we present the results of a multinomial logistic regression model, estimating the net effects of parental divorce and marital quality on the relative odds of identifying as (a) religious but not spiritual, (b) spiritual but not religious, or (c) neither religious nor spiritual, as opposed to both religious and spiritual, which is the omitted category in this model. These results are quite straightforward. First, the relative odds of identifying as "spiritual but not religious" are an estimated 69% lower ( $OR = .31$ ,  $p < .001$ ) for young adults from intact happy families as compared to those from intact high-conflict families. A similar, albeit more muted, pattern is observed for offspring from intact but unhappy families ( $OR = .52$ ,  $p < .05$ ). These two groups are also significantly different ( $p < .001$  and  $p < .05$ , respectively) from young adults who

experienced consistently low-conflict divorces while growing up. Second, in a pattern that is marginally significant, the relative odds of identifying as “neither religious nor spiritual” are 43% lower ( $OR = .57, p < .10$ ) for respondents from intact happy families, as compared with those from intact high-conflict families. Third, respondents raised in intact but unhappy families are especially disinclined to identify as “religious but not spiritual” ( $OR = .20, p < .05$ ). Finally, compared to offspring from consistently low-conflict divorce, those who experienced high pre-divorce parental conflict followed by reduced post-divorce conflict are marginally more inclined to opt for “neither religious nor spiritual” identity ( $p < .10$ ). These are the only significant family background effects that surface for this outcome.

## 5. Discussion

A wealth of research demonstrates that children tend to fare better in intact, two-parent families than in other types of families, particularly those characterized by divorce (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1995; Amato, 2001). This pattern generalizes to a broad array of outcomes, and a number of these effects of family background persist well into adulthood (e.g., Cherlin et al., 1995). However, researchers have also linked parents’ marital discord with undesirable developmental outcomes in children, raising the possibility that it may be more beneficial for offspring if parents in high-conflict unions decide to separate. Our work extends this line of inquiry into the area of young adults’ religious and spiritual lives, and makes several contributions to the literature by: (a) comparing seven discrete discord/divorce groupings; and (b) examining multiple domains of religiousness and spirituality, using data from a nationwide sample of young adults that was designed specifically for this purpose. The results allow us to address several important research issues.

First, compared to the offspring of divorce, are children from intact families more prone to engage in religious pursuits, and do they develop more enriching and rewarding spiritual lives? Although previous studies have reported such a pattern (e.g., Regnerus and Uecker, 2006; Zhai et al., 2007), our results provide a more complex and variegated set of findings. The clearest support for this claim surfaces among young adults whose parents were in intact, happy low-conflict marriages. These respondents report higher levels of religious attendance than nearly all others, as well as less religious disinterest, much lower levels of skepticism toward their parents’ religion, fewer doubts about God, and more positive God images and experiences. They are also much less likely to self-identify as “spiritual but not religious” as opposed to “religious and spiritual” (Zhai et al., 2008). There are also scattered findings suggesting that young adults raised by parents in intact unhappy (but low-conflict) marriages tend to embrace conventional religiousness and spirituality at relatively high levels. Specifically, they attend services more often than those who grew up in intact high-conflict unions; they also report fewer doubts about God, more favorable God images, and are less inclined to identify themselves as “religious but not spiritual” as opposed to “both religious and spiritual.” On the other hand, young adults raised by parents in unhappy, high-conflict relationships have relatively low scores on most religious and spiritual outcomes examined in this study, undermining broad generalizations about the links between parental divorce per se and religiousness and spirituality within this population.

Second, investigators have asked whether it is better for children if parents in high-discord unions divorce, rather than remaining together and exposing their offspring to protracted conflict. Several studies have suggested an affirmative answer to this question, at least in terms of the effects on children’s mental health and social well-being (Amato et al., 1995; Jekielek, 1998; Hanson, 1999). In this study, we distinguish between offspring from four types of divorced families: (a) those in which pre-divorce discord is diminished following the divorce; (b) those in which pre-divorce conflict is sustained after the split; (c) those in which offspring recall minimal overt discord preceding the parents’ separation, followed by a period of elevated conflict; and (d) those in which levels of discord were consistently low during both pre- and post-divorce periods. Do some offspring of divorce enjoy richer spiritual lives than their counterparts whose parents remained in intact, high-conflict marriages? The answer to this question is mixed. Clearly, some children of divorce seem to fare “worse” religiously and spiritually than those whose parents endured high-conflict unions. For example, offspring from consistently high-discord divorces express far greater skepticism toward maternal and paternal religiousness, although these two groups differ little on other outcomes examined in this study. In addition, offspring from divorced unions in which initially high levels of discord were diminished following the divorce report comparatively low levels of religious attendance in young adulthood, as well as higher levels of religious disinterest and skepticism toward the father’s religion. At the same time, these respondents expressed more positive images of God than those from intact, high-conflict unions. Further, the offspring of divorces that were low-conflict during the pre-divorce period only report skepticism about their mother’s religion, but also have relatively low levels of doubt about God.

At the same time, the offspring of divorces that were consistently low in conflict (i.e., before and after the separation) reported less skepticism about their mothers’ religion, fewer doubts about God, and less tendency to view God as angry than their counterparts from intact high-conflict marriages. These patterns run counter to the expectations derived from some arguments by Amato (2002). Briefly, he has suggested that in the absence of overt marital discord among parents, children may be surprised and unsettled by their parents’ (seemingly abrupt) decisions to terminate these “good enough” unions. Although children from such backgrounds may experience some added adjustment difficulties in other areas, we find little evidence that this distinction matters with regard to young adults’ religiousness and spirituality.

This study underscores the need for investigators in this area to study multiple facets of religious and spiritual life. Most previous work linking family structure with religiousness among adolescents and young adults has concentrated on religious affiliation and a small number of behaviors such as attendance, as well as generic indicators of religious salience (Sherkat and

Wilson, 1995; Stolzenberg et al., 1995; Regnerus and Uecker, 2006; Uecker et al., 2007. Our results suggest that institutional dimensions of religiousness may be more vulnerable to the effects of parents' marital discord and divorce than are non-organizational or subjective aspects. Although these children of conflict and divorce may be unenthusiastic about organized religion, they are no less interested in finding meaning, truth, or a connection with God or a Higher Power than their counterparts from intact happy marriages. However, they are considerably more skeptical that established religious institutions or traditions will be helpful in their quest. Nevertheless, on average, the offspring of divorce, as well as those steeped in parents' marital discord, tend to pursue active prayer lives, report largely positive experiences of God, and are more inclined than others to identify themselves as "spiritual but not religious" (Zhai et al., 2008). It is worth noting that these family background experiences do not predict any elevated likelihood of identifying as "neither religious nor spiritual" in our analyses.

Our findings cast new light on one of the most important developments on the contemporary American religious scene, namely the growing disengagement of young adults from organized religion (Hout and Fischer, 2002) and the concomitant rise of individualized spirituality (Roof, 1993, 2000; Zinnbauer et al., 1997, 1999; Marler and Hadaway, 2002; Shahabi et al., 2002). Although most previous accounts have emphasized cultural shifts in promoting these trends, our results suggest a possible demographic dimension to these patterns as well. Distance from institutional religion and growing interest in individualized forms of spiritual quest may result partly from long-term increases in divorce and their impact on intergenerational solidarity and religious formation. Given its far-reaching implications for both institutions – religion and family – this connection merits much closer and sustained investigation from researchers in the future.

Our findings are broadly consistent with the emerging view that parents' marital discord and divorce interact to influence children's outcomes (e.g., Riggio, 2004; Yu et al., 2010). The combination of intact families and happy, low-conflict parental marriages are most conducive to the intergenerational transmission of religion and spiritual formation of children and young adults, and this subgroup accounts for most of the previously observed distinctiveness between the offspring of divorce and those from intact two-parent families on religious and spiritual outcomes. Why might this be the case? Although a full examination of the mechanisms for each outcome lies well beyond the scope of this paper, Bandura's (1977) classic social learning approach – along with two more specific approaches from the psychology of religion, spiritual modeling (SM) and spiritual capital (SC), that are highly compatible with its basic logic (King and Mueller, 2004; King et al., 2002) – may offer useful explanatory frameworks. Briefly, offspring may be unmotivated to emulate the religious practices or spiritual orientations of parents who engage in high levels of discord and fail to provide a calm, loving environment for their upbringing. Children may also be unable to learn about religious or spiritual matters from parents who are preoccupied with their own issues or physically absent due to post-divorce custodial arrangements (Zhai et al., 2007).

Further, young people who observe self-centered or mean-spirited interactions among their parents may quickly recognize the inconsistency of such conduct with spiritual teachings of love, forgiveness, and trust. The cognitive dissonance that may result among offspring can be resolved by rejecting parents' religious teachings, and perhaps other traditional institutions as well. By contrast, no such cognitive dissonance is likely to afflict children whose parents have intact happy low-conflict marriages. This may help to explain (a) the very low likelihood that these young adults disparage the religion of their parents, and (b) the disproportionate skepticism of offspring from conflictual divorce toward the religiousness of their mothers. Why might such skepticism focus on mothers? One speculative answer is that approximately two-third of divorces are filed by women (Brinig and Allen, 2000), and significant numbers of these divorces end low-conflict marriages in which parents are unhappy, unfulfilled, or have other problems – problems that may not strike children as sufficient reason. Moreover, court proceedings are overwhelmingly likely to grant custody of children to mothers, which may leave large majorities of children living with the very person they hold mainly responsible for disrupting their families. Indeed, in our sample 72.5% of children of divorce reported living primarily with their mother during the post-divorce period. Further, in religious homes, children may blame parents, and particularly mothers, for desecrating something (the family) they had held to be sacred. Moreover, to the extent that parents experience spiritual strain (e.g., doubting or questioning faith) in the aftermath of divorce, children are more likely to be exposed to the mother's religious struggles. By contrast, the father is likely to be less religious than the mother, on average, and is less likely to file for divorce or to live with the children following the split. For these reasons, the father may be a smaller target, at least on this point. These insights may help to explain why offspring of conflictual divorce might be more skeptical about the religiousness of mothers than fathers. Such results and arguments also dovetail with a more general finding in the secular literature: the negative effects of discord and divorce on children's well-being are largely due to deterioration in the quality of parent–child bonds (e.g., Amato and Booth, 1997; Emery, 1999; Amato and Sobolewski, 2001).

Like all studies, our work is characterized by several limitations. First and foremost, the data are cross-sectional, and therefore we must rely on retrospective accounts of family background, children's religiousness, parental conflict, and other variables that are central to our analyses. This makes it impossible to definitively establish causal relationships. Longitudinal data collected at multiple waves would help to overcome this problem, and would also be desirable to overcome possible reporting biases that could result from this mode of data collection. We are unable to gauge the religiousness and religious (in)compatibility of parents during childhood, and may therefore underestimate the impact of childhood religious influences on practices, attitudes, and experiences in young adulthood. Additional unobserved variables, such as parental depression or personality, might potentially confound the associations reported in this study. Finally, although the overall sample size is adequate for the task at hand, relatively small cell sizes for some groups make it impossible to systematically investigate variations in the patterns reported here by gender, race or ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or other key parameters of social structure. However, this should be an important priority for researchers in the future.

These limitations notwithstanding, we believe that our study has provided a valuable extension of the burgeoning research literature linking parental discord and divorce with children's outcomes in young adulthood. Religiousness and spirituality are especially worthwhile foci of scientific study due to their implications for a wide range of other outcomes. Using data from the National Survey of Youth and Religion (NSYR), a nationally representative longitudinal study following young people from ages 18 to 24, [Smith and Snell \(2009\)](#) found that highly religious young adults tended to fare better than their less religious counterparts on a host of measures. On average, highly religious young adults were less depressed, had a more normal body weight, felt closer to their parents, faced lower risks of contracting a sexually transmitted disease (STD), and were more satisfied with life. In addition, the more religious young adults tended to achieve higher levels of education, to show greater concern for the poor and elderly, and to volunteer and give money to charity. Many of these patterns among the youngest segment of our sample (ages 18–24) are also mirrored in studies of the general population (e.g., [Sherkat and Ellison, 1999](#)), suggesting that they also tend to surface among the older segment of our sample (ages 25–35) as well. Moreover, given the dynamism and fluidity in family structure and norms, as well as the religious and spiritual landscape in the contemporary United States, these findings may hold particular significance in light of the longstanding interdependence of the social institutions of family – and especially marriage – and religion ([Waite and Lehrer, 2003](#); [Wilcox, 2005](#); [Edgell, 2006](#); [Mahoney, 2010](#)). Further research along the lines sketched above may enhance our understanding of these complex tectonic shifts in the religion–family connection.

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