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RESEARCH PAPER

God, Father, Mother, Gender: How Are Religiosity and Parental Bonds During Childhood Linked to Midlife Flourishing?

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Abstract

While research in the United States reveals favorable associations between religiosity and well-being during childhood, adolescence, or adulthood, whether childhood religiosity improves flourishing among U.S. adults remains unclear. Following a life-course approach, we examine whether childhood religiosity, measured in terms of the importance of religion growing up, associates with improved midlife flourishing. Drawing on national longitudinal data from the United States (1995–2014 MIDUS study), we find significant and large associations between childhood religiosity and midlife flourishing, measured in terms of overall and domain-specific flourishing. Its effect size was on par with key demographic predictors. However, in line with the deeply interlinked nature of family and religion, childhood religiosity was linked to midlife flourishing only in the presence of a favorable mother–child relationship growing up. Men raised in religious homes with high maternal warmth reported nearly three-quarters of a standard deviation higher flourishing than those with low maternal warmth. Further analysis confirmed that this combination of religion and family among men in particular increases the odds of adult religiosity, as men seem more susceptible to "losing their religion" when experiencing strained maternal relationships. Analysis of 20-year follow-up data collected in 2005 and 2014 finds continued associations between childhood religiosity and later-life flourishing, suggesting a beneficial trajectory carrying into old age. Overall, we conclude that any robust effects of religion on well-being across the life course are likely to be interwoven with family, gender, and other social institutions, perhaps tracing in part to the distinctive, personalized culture of American religion.

Keywords Flourishing · Religion · Family · Gender · Life course

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1 Introduction

In the United States, most adults believe in a personal and engaged God (Froese and Bader 2010) and religiosity is relatively common in comparison to other Western industrialized nations (Bader and Finke 2010). Thousands of studies based on US data have linked specific facets of religiosity such as religious importance and attendance with higher levels of well-being (Koenig et al. 2012). Moreover, recent work suggests that these associations begin to take shape in childhood. For example, longitudinal research from the United States shows links between childhood religious exposure and several aspects of adulthood health, including psychological distress and mortality (Petts 2014; Upenieks et al. 2019).

While this work provides some evidence for potential long-term benefits of childhood religiosity on adult well-being, it remains unclear whether religiosity might form a more comprehensive foundation for flourishing in adulthood. In 1946, the World Health Organization declared that the absence of illness does not equate to the presence of thriving. Since then, the concept of flourishing has received growing scientific interest (Keyes 2007; VanderWeele 2017; du Plooy et al. 2019). Flourishing provides a much-needed, comprehensive portrait of well-being relative to typical, singular measures of mental health (Keyes 2002; VanderWeele 2017). Flourishing is a multidimensional approach to well-being that integrates psychological, emotional, and social domains. It not only considers the absence of negative symptomatology, but also includes the presence of positive mental and social states such as engagement, meaning, joy, and social belonging, support, and integration (Keyes 2007; Keyes and Simoes 2012). In total, flourishing may be defined as “the experience of life going well…a combination of feeling good and functioning effectively” (Huppert and So 2013, p. 838).

Existing U.S.-based evidence on childhood religiosity and adult flourishing is suggestive at best. Religiosity has been shown to associate with, at various life-course stages, social relationships, life satisfaction, optimism, mental health, and meaning in life, for example (Koenig et al. 2012; Chen and VanderWeele 2018). However, these measurements have spanned different life stages rather than being surveyed at the same point in time, and flourishing encompasses other domains such as self-acceptance, social contribution, personal growth, and life integration or coherence, for example.

Just as important, flourishing is an inherently cross-domain approach to well-being, which in turn demands that any life-course approach involving religion should mirror the interconnectedness of institutional and role domains (Mahoney 2010; Bengtson et al. 2013). At least in the United States, the institutions of family and religion are deeply intertwined (Mahoney 2010). Meanwhile, gender is a social role enacted across both of these institutional contexts, one which implicates potentially important patterns of behavior, coping, and emotional expression relevant to well-being (Hill and Needham 2013).

In this study, we take a life course approach to the association between religion and flourishing in the United States. We focus on the combination of parent–child bonds and childhood religiosity in predicting flourishing at midlife and later life. By positioning parent–child relationships in terms of their fundamental capacity to shape childhood religious experiences, we revisit and extend typical approaches to religion and family treating these domains as having merely additive effects. Our findings reveal for the first time their potential role in altering the life course associations of childhood religiosity on midlife flourishing, especially for men.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Childhood Religiosity and Midlife Flourishing

Religion can be formative in children's lives (Bartkowski et al. 2008; Bengtson et al. 2013). Available evidence suggests that religiosity promotes, rather than hinders, children's well-being. Those raised in highly religious homes report higher psychological well-being and happiness throughout the early phases of the life course (Bartkowski et al. 2008; Holder et al. 2010). As a result of moral directives promoted by religious communities, higher childhood religiosity has also been linked to a lower use of illicit drugs and non-early initiation of sexual activity (Pearce and Denton 2011), both of which tend to be associated with higher levels of overall health or well-being across the remaining life course.

Although most studies on religion in the early part of the life course present positive or protective associations with indicators of well-being or thriving, there is also evidence that religion may have negative effects in the lives of youth. For instance, religion can be a source of disagreement and tension between parents and children (Pearce and Haynie 2004). Research also suggests that affiliation with conservative religious traditions can lower educational attainment and the prestige of institutions attended, especially for females, who are expected to make early transitions into marriage and childbearing roles (Uecker and Pearce 2017).

While plenty of research establishes associations between specific aspects of religiosity and mental or physical well-being among children, adolescents, or adults (see Koenig et al. 2012; Schieman et al. 2017), no clear evidence exists on any overarching link between childhood religiosity and later-life flourishing. A lack of attention to adult flourishing is a curious oversight, given how religiosity already has known links to some aspects of human flourishing such as life meaning and purpose (Steger and Frazier 2005), life satisfaction (Lim and Putnam 2010), and social integration or support (Krause 2006). However, because flourishing also encompasses other domains, such as positive emotion, self-acceptance, and a sense of autonomy, religion would need to carry consistently positive effects over most of these interrelated domains to promote overall flourishing. Newer research draws links between childhood religiosity and mortality or specific indicators of adult mental health (Petts 2014; Upenieks et al. 2019), but does not establish a relationship with a more comprehensive measure of flourishing. Decades of research into religion and well-being lead us to expect, on balance, that it leads to flourishing:

Hypothesis 1 Higher childhood religiosity will be associated with greater midlife flourishing.

2.2 Parent–Child Relationships in the Context of Religion

Research into flourishing illuminates the interrelatedness of social and institutional domains in promoting overall thriving (Chen and VanderWeele 2018). Childhood is a key phase of the life course for religious development, and parents serve as key agents of socialization, thus making children's experiences of religion and family deeply interconnected (Bengtson et al. 2013). Parents inculcate religiosity through teaching, role-modelling, and through co-participation in religious activities (Dollahite and Marks 2005). Childhood socialization occurs principally through parent–child relationships and interactions

(Conger and Donnellan 2007), and emotional attachment is likely to shape whether children are receptive to their parents' beliefs or values (Bengtson et al. 2013). This implies that whether and how religiosity eventually promotes adult flourishing is likely to depend on the nature or warmth of parent–child relationships.

Furthermore, although specific teachings differ between traditions, most religions reinforce the salience and importance of parent–child bonds. They do so by encouraging parents to develop strong relationships with their children and prioritize their familial responsibilities (Bartkowski et al. 2008). In fact, religious parents often "sanctify" their parental role and view tasks related to childrearing as a manifestation of God's will (Mahoney 2010). While religion often promotes parent–child closeness or togetherness, the nature and strength of parent–child emotional bonds varies greatly nonetheless, making high-quality parent–child bonds by no means guaranteed or "indoctrinated" by religion, social class, or any other social institution (Andersson 2016; Wilkinson 2018).

While favorable parent–child bonds can be measured in distinct ways, they generally involve showing interest in and knowledge of the child's life and demonstrating an attentiveness to their choices and activities (Lee et al. 2018). These engaged relationships help connect parental and child religiosity. Past work has suggested that parental warmth is associated with several better health outcomes over time (Andersson 2016), in part because it facilitates the development of key psychosocial resources across the life course such as emotional self-regulation, social support, self-esteem, and problem-solving skills (Taylor et al. 2011). These features, in turn, are known to be associated with flourishing in midlife and beyond (Schotanus-Dijkstra et al. 2016). Indeed, recent work has found a direct and positive link between parental warmth and midlife flourishing (Chen et al. 2019).

Taking this argument one step further, close or warm bonds between parents and children may alter how deeply religion is socialized and any implications this may hold for well-being. According to Bengtson et al. (2013, p. 73), parental warmth is the "pivotal factor" in the successful transmission of religion to children. Indeed, parental warmth is associated with more frequent conversations about religion and provides a secure base through which young people can develop their own religious identity (Desrosiers et al. 2011). Relationships with parents, for better or worse, tend also to be linked to a child's first conception of God or the divine (Bengtson et al. 2013, p. 71). Past work has explicitly shown that parental kindness and love enhances the likelihood of a child holding images of a loving God, while harsh parental practices may undermine a child's ability to form positive conceptions of a divine being (Sim and Yow 2011). In turn, holding images of a loving, caring divine figure is associated with greater mental well-being later on in the life course (Homan 2014).

2.3 The Role of Gender in Religious Socialization and Parent–Child Relationships

Thus far, we have discussed the potential role of parental warmth in both explaining and directing the relationship between childhood religiosity and midlife flourishing. However, gender is a key organizing principle of social interaction and socialization (Ridgeway and Correll 2004) that in turn structures experiences of religion and family. The gender of the parent and child may shape the association between childhood religiosity and parental warmth. Below, we overview how distinct combinations of parent and child gender may matter to the ultimate effect of child religiosity on flourishing later in life.

The weight of existing evidence suggests that mothers have the greatest influence on child religiosity (Boyatzis 2006; Guttierrez et al. 2014). Mothers generally bear the responsibility for the religious socialization of their children. Maternal religiosity tends to be associated with favorable parental behaviors such as care and hugging and praising (Desrosiers et al. 2011), which promote relationship quality with their mother, including trust, understanding, and affection (Pearce and Axinn 1998). On the part of children, girls may be more responsive to maternal religious socialization than boys. A well-established finding within the sociology of religion literature is that women show higher levels of religiosity than men (Schnabel 2018), and women are often found to experience greater boosts to their well-being from religion than men across samples from the U.S., South Korea, and Europe. (Ellison and Fan 2008; Jung 2014; Lewis et al. 2011).

Early on in the life course, girls tend to report stronger religious beliefs and more frequent practices compared to boys (Molock and Barksdale 2013). Adolescent girls, more than boys, find religion to be a mainstay in their lives, as they frequently attend religious services, pray privately, and engage with religious texts (King and Roeser 2009). Based on gender socialization theories, it has been argued that women are more likely to be attracted to religion because many of the traits valued in religion (e.g., obedience to God, nurturing) are feminine traits (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997). Though girls may show an enhanced proclivity to endorse religious beliefs without parental intervention, the intergenerational transmission from mothers to daughters is enhanced where mothers show warmth (Spilka et al. 2003). Moreover, mothers' images of a loving God, an important predictor of well-being, were more strongly related to their daughters' beliefs about God than were father's beliefs about God (Dickie et al. 2006). Girls socialized by religious mothers tend also to utilize collaborative religious coping styles to confront adversity in their life, in which they work together with God to implement strategies of action (Butler-Barnes et al. 2018). Broader evidence on life-course health inequalities suggests that, at least within traditional families containing two biological parents, childhood maternal warmth may matter more to adult women's health whereas paternal warmth matters more to adult men's health (Andersson 2016).

Despite trends indicating that adolescent girls are more religious than boys, this does not necessarily mean that religion will only be associated with the well-being of girls. Literature at the intersection of family and religion indicates that boys' religious behaviors are more affected by maternal religious modeling than are girls' (Flor and Knapp 2001). Females may be more personally inclined towards religious pursuits, while males may be more likely to require guidance from their parents to be steadfast in their faith (Kim-Spoon et al. 2012), and especially from their mothers. Indeed, prior work has shown that the highest correlation between parent and child religiosity exists in the mother–son dyad ($r = 0.55$) (Kim-Spoon et al. 2012; Stearns and McKinney 2019). Among young adults, mothers' nurturance positively influenced their sons' self-esteem, which increased the extent to which they saw themselves as religious, and their perceptions of closeness to God (Dickie et al. 2006). Taken together, prior evidence sets up two hypotheses regarding the role of maternal warmth for translating childhood religiosity into midlife flourishing:

Hypothesis 2a Among daughters, midlife flourishing linked to childhood religiosity will be highest in the presence of maternal warmth.

Hypothesis 2b Among sons, midlife flourishing linked to childhood religiosity will be highest in the presence of maternal warmth.

Compared to paternal warmth, we expect maternal warmth to be a stronger moderator of the relationship between childhood religiosity and flourishing than paternal warmth. Indeed, fewer studies suggest that paternal influence should matter more for the faith development of children. However, some research suggests that fathers' religiosity may also be a key factor, fostering greater involvement in children's lives and more positive social interactions (King 2003). The father-daughter dyad may be especially important for the religiosity of girls (Stearns and McKinney 2017). This is especially the case when daughters perceive their relationship with their father to be warm (Okagaki and Bevis 1999). Daughters typically also have less conflict with their father than mother, and the father-daughter dyad may be less competitive compared to the father-son dyad (Shulman and Seiffge-Krenke 1997). Daughters' relationships with their fathers often go a long way in determining their ability to trust others, which may also shape their perceptions of God as loving and trusting (Flouri 2005). To a lesser extent, fathers' religiosity is also important for shaping the religious beliefs and practices of sons (Clark et al. 1988). This body of evidence informs our final set of hypotheses:

Hypothesis 3a Among daughters, midlife flourishing linked to childhood religiosity will be highest in the presence of paternal warmth.

Hypothesis 3b Among sons, midlife flourishing linked to childhood religiosity will be highest in the presence of paternal warmth.

3 Data and Methodology

We draw on data from the National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS). MIDUS is a nationally representative sample of non-institutionalized, English-speaking adults recruited through nationwide random digit dialing. The first wave (MIDUS I) was conducted in 1995–1996, consisting of 7108 respondents aged 25–74. Wave 2 was conducted both in 2004–2006 and Wave 3 in 2013–2014, with fairly high retention rates (e.g., for instance, over three-quarters of living participants responded to the Wave 3 survey). At the time when the Wave 1 national sample was collected (N = 3,032), mean respondent age was 46 years with a range of 25–74. Of the initial respondents, 2257 (74%) participated in Wave 2, and 1414 people (47%) participated in Wave 3. All of our analyses employ the MIDUS sampling weights that represent the United States population.

3.1 Dependent Variable: Composite Flourishing Score

We follow a procedure recently developed by Chen et al. (2019) to build a composite index of flourishing. Past research has tended to rely on a binary indicator of flourishing based on being in the top tertile of the sample in flourishing (e.g., Keyes and Simoes 2012). However, we employed a continuous measure of flourishing in order to capture the full distribution of flourishing in the population. Main results were consistent with either measurement strategy.

Following the definition offered by Keyes (2002), flourishing was calculated across three subdomains of emotional, psychological, and social well-being that were measured at Wave 1 of MIDUS (see Keyes 2002; Keyes and Simoes 2012). Preliminary analyses showed that effect sizes of childhood religiosity were similar and not significantly different across these subdomains, supporting the use of Chen et al.'s (2019) composite score approach for this study. We also conducted 10- and 20-year follow-up analyses, detailed below.

Specifically, the first subdomain of the flourishing score was emotional well-being. This consisted of (a) a six-item scale of positive affect (Crawford and Henry 2004) that was used to assess positive feelings (i.e., full of life, happy, calm,) over the past 30 days, and (b) a one-item measure of life satisfaction. We standardized positive affect and life satisfaction scores because they were initially assessed with different scales. We then summed the standardized scores of these two measures to create a score of emotional well-being ($\alpha = 0.72$).

The second subdomain of the flourishing scale comprises psychological well-being, assessed using the 18-item scale provided by Ryff (1989). Six dimensions of psychological well-being were measured, which included three items on each subscale including (a) self-acceptance ("When I look at my life, I am pleased with how things have turned out"), (b) personal growth ("It is important to have new experiences that challenge how I think about myself and the world"), (c) positive relations with others ("People would describe me as a giving person, willing to share my time with others"), (d) purpose in life ("Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them"), (e) environmental mastery ("In general, I feel I am in charge of the situation in which I live") and (f) autonomy ("I have confidence in my own opinions, even if they are different from the way most other people think") ($\alpha = 0.71$).

Finally, the third and final subdomain of the flourishing scale is social well-being, which was assessed by a 15-item scale from Keyes (1998). Five dimensions of social functioning were captured, including (a) social acceptance ("I believe that people are kind"), (b) social contribution ("I have something valuable to give to the world"), (c) social actualization ("The world is becoming a better place for everyone"), (d) social coherence ("I find it easy to predict what will happen in society") and (e) social integration ("I feel close to other people in my community"). We calculated an overall social well-being score by summing the scores across all five subscales ($\alpha = 0.74$).

Following the protocol outlined by Chen and colleagues (2019), we standardized scores on the emotional, psychological, and social well-being dimensions because they were measured on different scoring scales (e.g., for emotional well-being, life satisfaction was measured with a 10-point scale, and positive affect with a 5-item scale). We then summed the standardized emotional, psychological, and social well-being scores to create an overall flourishing score. In our sample, flourishing scores range from -12.84 to 5.30. We carefully considered the potential for skewness, given the longer left-hand tail of this variable. However, less than 2% of cases fell outside the range of ± 2 standard deviations from the mean. Following Chen et al. (2019), we treated this variable as normally distributed. Results were also robust to an unstandardized measure of flourishing, calculated by taking the average score of the emotional, psychological, and social well-being scales.

3.2 Focal Independent Variables

3.2.1 Childhood Religiosity

This was assessed by the following question: "How important was religion in your home when you were growing up?" (e.g., Chen et al. 2019). Response options were (1) "Not very important" and "Not at all important," collapsed into one category to achieve higher cell size (*low*) (the omitted reference group in all analyses), (2) "Somewhat important," (*moderate*) and (3) "Very important" (*high*).

3.2.2 Parental Warmth

Separate scales were used to assess maternal and paternal warmth. The maternal warmth scale asked respondents to consider their primary female caregiver and the paternal warmth scale, the primary male caregiver. This allows for parental warmth to be measured for non-biological (e.g., adoptive or step) parents. Respondents answered six questions about both their mothers and fathers: (1) "How much did she/he understand your problems and worries?"; (2) "How much love and affection did she/he give you?"; (3) "How much time and attention did she/he give you when you needed it?"; (4) "How much could you confide in him/her about things that were bothering you?"; (5) "How much effort did he/she put into watching over you and making sure you had a good upbringing?"; and (6) "How much did he/she teach you about life?" Responses were coded where 1 = "not at all," 2 = "a little," 3 = "some," and 4 = "a lot" ($\alpha = 0.71$ for maternal warmth and $\alpha = 0.72$ for paternal warmth).

3.3 Childhood Covariates

Our analyses also adjust for childhood covariates related to childhood religiosity, parent–child emotional bonds, and subsequent flourishing across the life course. Parental education was considered for the household head (typically the father, with mother's education utilized if there was no measure of father's education available.) We also adjust for childhood urbanicity (0 for "rural" and small" town, 1 for city, suburbs, or medium-sized town), whether the respondent experienced parental divorce before the age 16 (1 = yes, 0 = no), number of siblings, and whether the family was ever on welfare during the respondent's childhood (1 = yes, 0 = no).

3.4 Demographic Covariates

We control for basic aspects of demographic background, assessed at Wave 1 of MIDUS: age (in years) and race or ethnicity (white or non-white). Marital status and educational attainment are omitted from the main analyses presented here, which are focused on childhood factors related to midlife flourishing, because they are post-childhood variables. However, our results do not depend on these post-childhood adjustments.

3.5 Analytic Plan

We conducted a series of Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models with robust standard errors. Multiple imputation with chained equations were used to handle missing data (Royston 2005) ($m = 20$). Our dependent variable of flourishing was included in the imputation procedure, but we excluded cases missing on the dependent variable from our final analytic sample, leaving us with 3030 cases for analysis. Results were also consistent with the listwise deletion method of handling missing data. Since the majority of our hypotheses were specific to the child (respondent) gender, we stratified our analyses by gender. In the current study, 1559 cases are considered in female-only models, and 1471 cases in male-only models.

To examine the statistical interaction between childhood religiosity and parental warmth (Hypotheses 2a, 2b, 3a, 3b), we test moderation by using product terms between childhood religiosity, an ordinal variable, and parental warmth, a continuous variable. These product terms, numbering four in total, treat low childhood religiosity as the omitted or baseline level, and they allow the effects of maternal and paternal warmth to vary across all three levels of religiosity (low, moderate, and high). The goal is to pinpoint specific combinations of childhood religiosity and parental warmth within the data, and test whether they have differing associations with flourishing (when compared to other combinations). Within these models, the maternal and paternal warmth main effects shown refer to warmth among low-religiosity respondents; product terms test for significant differences in these warmth effects among moderate- and high-religiosity respondents (against the shown warmth effect among low-religiosity respondents).

We also assessed the variance inflation factor (VIF) scores to determine if there was problematic multicollinearity in our analytic models; all VIF values are below 2.0, a common threshold offered by Allison (1999). A correlation matrix of all main study covariates is shown in Appendix 2 for males (Table A) and females (Table B) respectively. Generally, these correlations are weak to moderate, which is consistent with low model VIFs.

4 Results

Descriptive statistics for the MIDUS sample are overviewed in Table 1. At midlife, men show significantly higher flourishing scores (0.13) compared to women (−0.12) ($p < 0.01$; centered values; SD = 2.40). Consistent with previous work, women showed somewhat higher levels of childhood religiosity compared to men ($p < 0.05$): 46% of women reported growing up in highly religious homes compared to 42% of men. Men perceived higher levels of maternal warmth (3.23) compared to women (3.04) ($p < 0.001$; paternal warmth not significant).

Consistent with the family-promoting role of religion, maternal and paternal warmth both were higher for children raised in highly religious homes. For example, those with high childhood religiosity reported significantly higher average maternal warmth scores of 3.27 (SD = 0.65), compared to 2.84 (SD = 0.79) for those with low childhood religiosity ($p < 0.001$). Those with high childhood religiosity also reported significantly higher paternal warmth scores (mean = 2.94, SD = 0.80) compared to those with low childhood religiosity (mean = 2.46, SD = 0.82; $p < 0.001$) (analyses not shown).

Table 2 presents regression results for males (N = 1471), and Table 3 presents an identical set of models for females (N = 1561). All models adjust for all study covariates.

Model 1 of Tables 2 and 3 present a test of Hypothesis 1 by evaluating whether childhood religiosity is associated with midlife flourishing. These models show that high childhood religiosity is associated with higher flourishing scores for males (b = 0.68, $p < 0.001$) and females (b = 0.71, $p < 0.001$) compared to low childhood religiosity. For both men and women, those raised in highly religious homes reported flourishing scores over one quarter of a standard deviation higher than those raised in non-religious homes, which was a summed index of standardized averages of emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Moreover, post-hoc tests comparing coefficients revealed that men and women raised in

Table 1 Sample descriptive statistics, MIDUS study (female and male samples)

	Range	Total sample		Male		Female		Diff. test
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	(*p* value)
Flourishing Score	− 12.84, 5.31	0.03	2.40	0.13	2.29	− 0.12	2.47	**
Childhood religiosity								*
High		0.44		0.42		0.46		
Moderate		0.36		0.37		0.35		
Low		0.20		0.21		0.19		
Maternal warmth	0.94, 3.96	3.13	0.69	3.23	0.62	3.04	0.75	***
Paternal warmth	0.96, 4	2.76	0.80	2.77	0.77	2.74	0.84	
Demographic covariates								
Age	21.75	47.84	13.10	47.47	13.06	48.19	13.13	
White, non-Hispanic		0.89		0.90		0.89		
Childhood covariates								
Parental education								
Less than high school		0.43				0.44		
High school education or equivalent		0.29				0.28		
Some college education		0.09				0.09		
University degree or higher		0.19				0.19		
Parents on welfare		0.06		0.06		0.07		
Parental divorce		0.10		0.10		0.12		**
Number of siblings	0.8	3.15	2.58	3.06	2.58	3.25	2.58	*
Urban childhood residence		0.48		0.49		0.47		
Covariates for section 4.2 Analyses Only (Online Appendix 5 and 6)								
Household income								***
Quintile 1 ($0–$22,500)		0.16				0.24		
Quintile 2 ($22,501–$40,500)		0.19				0.21		
Quintile 3 ($40,501–$64,500)		0.22				0.18		
Quintile 4 ($64,501–$111,500)		0.19				0.21		
Quintile 5 ($111,500–$300,000+)		0.23				0.17		
Adulthood religious affiliation								n.s
Protestant (Mainline)		0.47				0.51		
Conservative Protestant		0.07				0.08		
Catholic		0.26				0.25		
None/Atheist/Agnostic		0.03				0.02		
Other		0.17				0.14		
Region of residence								n.s
Midwest		0.19				0.17		
South		0.24				0.26		
Northeast		0.34				0.37		
West		0.23				0.21		
N of cases		3030		1471		1559		

Overall flourishing scores were created by summing the standardized averages of the emotional, psychological, and social well-being subscales

$^{*}p<.05$; $^{**}p<.01$; $^{***}p<.001$

Table 2 Flourishing regressed on childhood religiosity and parental warmth, males (N = 1471)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Main effects			
High childhood religiosity[a]	0.68*** (0.17)	− 1.13 (0.76)	0.59 (0.55)
Moderate childhood religiosity[a]	0.28 (0.18)	− 0.40 (0.77)	− 0.39 (0.56)
Maternal warmth		0.73*** (0.18)	
Paternal warmth			0.74*** (0.11)
Product terms			
High childhood religiosity[a] × maternal warmth		0.46* (0.23)	
Moderate childhood religiosity[a] × maternal warmth		0.16 (0.24)	
High childhood religiosity[a] × paternal warmth			− 0.06 (0.20)
Moderate childhood religiosity[a] × paternal warmth			0.18 (0.21)
Covariates			
Age	0.02** (0.01)	0.02** (0.01)	0.02** (0.01)
White	− 0.15 (0.23)	− 0.04 (0.22)	− 0.05 (0.22)
Urban	− 0.18 (0.13)	− 0.16 (0.12)	− 0.09 (0.12)
Parental education			
High school degree[b]	0.07 (0.15)	0.12 (0.14)	0.08 (0.14)
Some college or vocational[b]	0.39 (0.22)	0.36 (0.21)	0.35 (0.21)
University degree or higher[b]	0.30 (0.17)	0.22 (0.16)	0.15 (0.16)
Parental divorce	0.03 (0.21)	− 0.06 (0.20)	− 0.02 (0.20)
Parents on welfare	− 0.84** (0.25)	− 0.63* (0.24)	− 0.59* (0.25)
Siblings	0.03 (0.02)	0.03 (0.02)	0.04 (0.03)
Constant	− 0.99* (0.41)	− 3.19*** (0.66)	− 2.82*** (0.57)

Standard errors shown in parentheses

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$

[a] Compared to low childhood religiosity

[b] Compared to less than a high school degree

Table 3 Flourishing Regressed on Childhood Religiosity and Parental Warmth, Females (N = 1,559)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Main effects			
High childhood religiosity[a]	0.71*** (0.18)	0.06 (0.64)	0.82 (0.56)
Moderate childhood religiosity[a]	0.25 (0.19)	0.39 (0.68)	0.81 (0.59)
Maternal warmth		0.99*** (0.17)	
Paternal warmth			0.78*** (0.17)
Product terms			
High childhood religiosity[a] × maternal warmth		0.05 (0.22)	
Moderate childhood religiosity[a] × maternal warmth		−0.15 (0.23)	
High childhood religiosity[a] × paternal warmth			−0.17 (0.21)
Moderate childhood religiosity[a] × paternal warmth			−0.28 (0.22)
Covariates			
Age	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)
White	0.77*** (0.21)	0.85*** (0.20)	0.80*** (0.21)
Urban	0.14 (0.14)	0.20 (0.13)	0.15 (0.14)
Parental education			
High school degree[b]	−0.01 (0.15)	0.05 (0.15)	−0.01 (0.15)
Some college or vocational[b]	0.52* (0.24)	0.51* (0.23)	0.40 (0.23)
University degree or higher[b]	0.01 (0.18)	−0.08 (0.17)	−0.09 (0.17)
Parental divorce	−0.04 (0.19)	−0.24 (0.19)	−0.04 (0.19)
Parents on welfare	−0.62* (0.26)	−0.47 (0.25)	−0.45 (0.25)
Siblings	−0.01 (0.03)	0.03 (0.02)	0.02 (0.03)
Constant	−1.47*** (0.41)	−4.16*** (0.60)	−3.35*** (0.58)

Standard errors shown in parentheses

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$

[a] Compared to low childhood religiosity

[b] Compared to less than a high school degree

highly religious homes had significantly higher flourishing scores than those raised in moderately religious homes.

We calculated partial eta-squared to determine effect sizes for our categorical measure of childhood religiosity. Controlling for all other covariates in Model 1, the partial eta-squared value for childhood religiosity was 0.024 for males and 0.02 for females. These indicate a small effect (Cohen 2013), as childhood religiosity accounted for approximately 2.4% and 2% of the variance in overall flourishing scores for males and females, respectively. While a small effect size by Cohen's standards, the effect sizes for childhood religiosity are on par with key demographic predictors of flourishing such as race (partial eta squared = 0.021 for males, and 0.018 for females) and age (0.025 for males and 0.027 for females), suggesting its importance as a predictor of well-being. As Cohen (2013, pp. 11–12) notes, "many relationships pursued in 'soft' behavioral science are of this order of magnitude [small]." Moreover, work within the life course paradigm generally shows that childhood variables have small effects on adulthood outcomes. In life course research, the goal is often to consider pathways from childhood to adulthood, not the effect of variables themselves (see Schafer and Andersson 2020), so it is uncommon to find that childhood variables carry strong effects into adulthood. Taken together, these results are thus consistent with Hypothesis 1: higher childhood religiosity is positively associated with midlife flourishing.

Model 2 serves as a test of Hypotheses 2a (women) and 2b (men), concerning whether maternal warmth interacts with childhood religiosity in the prediction of midlife flourishing, for each gender separately. Among women, this product term fails to reach statistical significance, failing to support Hypothesis 2a. We do, however, observe a significant, positive statistical interaction between maternal warmth and high childhood religiosity (relative

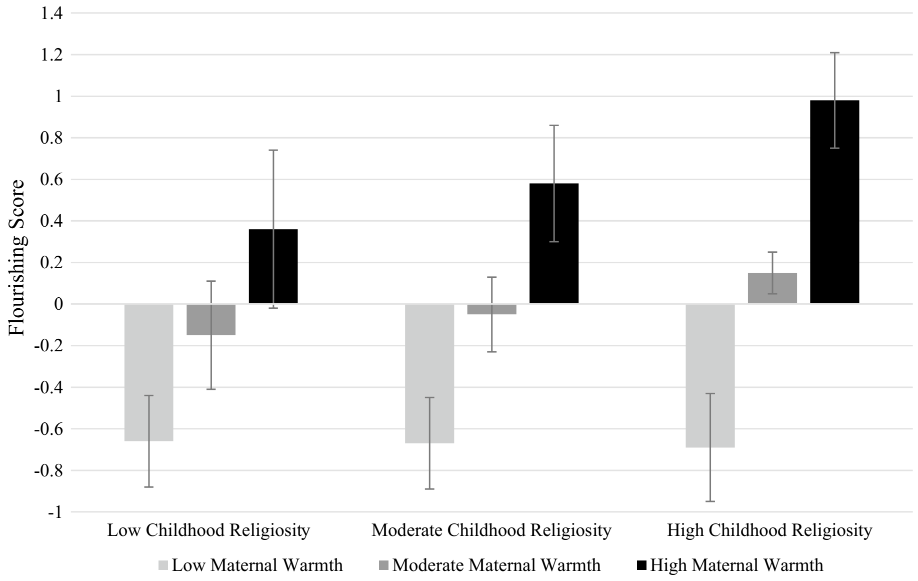

Fig. 1 Predicted Flourishing Scores, Childhood Religiosity x Maternal Warmth Male Sample (N = 1471). *Notes* Flourishing score predictions across childhood religiosity are generated by maternal warmth scores. Low warmth refers to 25th percentile, moderate warmth to 50th percentile, and high warmth to 75th percentile of maternal warmth. 95% confidence intervals are shown. Overall flourishing scores were created by summing the standardized averages of the emotional, psychological, and social well-being subscales

to low childhood religiosity) in the male sample (b = 0.46, $p < 0.05$) in Model 2, in support of Hypothesis 2b.

Figure 1 depicts flourishing scores across particular combinations of childhood religiosity and maternal warmth. Overall, favorable mother-son bonds were associated with substantially different levels of midlife flourishing for those growing up in religious homes. Men raised in highly religious homes with low maternal warmth had average midlife flourishing scores of -0.69, compared with 0.98 if they were raised by a warm mother, a difference of 1.67 on our measure of flourishing. This corresponds to nearly three-quarters of a standard deviation higher scores on overall flourishing for those raised in highly religious homes with high maternal warmth compared to those with low maternal warmth. The most important, overarching finding we see is that growing up in a moderately or highly religious home is associated with *lower* levels of midlife flourishing in the absence of a favorable mother-son bond, implying that a warm parental relationship may be necessary for sons to reap the psychological benefits of religion. Figure 1 also shows that children with low maternal warmth raised in moderate or highly religious families do not report lower flourishing than children with low maternal warmth raised in low religious families, a point which we return to in the discussion section.

Finally, Model 3 of Tables 2 and 3 test Hypotheses 3a and 3b. We found no evidence that paternal warmth conditioned the effect of childhood religiosity on midlife flourishing, either for men or women (*p*s > 0.20).

4.1 Examining the Role of Adult Religiosity: A Mediated-Moderation Analysis

The important finding that childhood religiosity contributes to midlife flourishing only in the presence of favorable mother-son bonds suggests a strong interdependence of family and religion in determining life-course outcomes. We sought to determine the role of *continued adult religiosity* in explaining this key finding in the *male sample only* (N = 1471). Individuals live nuanced religious biographies that involve changes in affiliation, attendance, or religious importance (Uecker et al. 2016), and favorable mother-son bonds may be particularly effective at ensuring continuation of religiosity into adulthood. Figure 2 shows adult religiosity as a proposed mediator on the path between midlife flourishing and childhood family and religion.

As the key adult mediating variable for the mediated-moderation analysis in Fig. 2, MIDUS adult respondents were asked to consider at Wave 1, "How important is religion

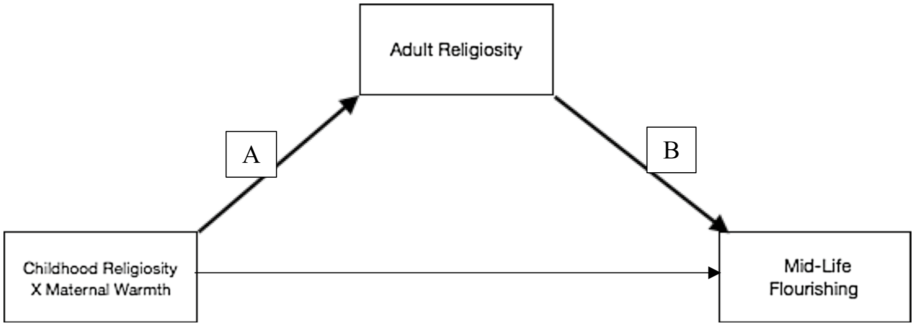

Fig. 2 Conceptual diagram of mediated-moderation analysis. *Note* All variables in this figure are measured at Wave 1. This analysis was performed only on the male sample (N = 1471)

in your life?" where 1 = "Not at all important," and "Not very important," 2 = "Somewhat important," and 3 = "Very important."

Since we consider adulthood religiosity as a mediator, we also included adjustment for several other potentially confounding adulthood characteristics, also measured at Wave 1 of MIDUS. We include a measure of marital status (married = 1, other = 0), respondent's education, contrasting those with less than a high school degree (reference) to respondents with (1) a high school degree or equivalent, (2) some college, or (3) a university degree. We also control for household income, adjusted for the number of adults aged 18 and over in the household. To accommodate the non-normality of the income variable, we categorized the household-size adjusted income into quintiles. We also adjust for location of residence, coded into four regions of the United States (Midwest = reference, South, Northeast, and West). Finally, a measure of adulthood religious affiliation was also included, which contrasted Conservative Protestants with Mainline Protestants, Catholics, None/Atheist/Agnostic individuals, and Other Religion.

In evaluating the proposed mediating pathway, we note evidence in support of Path A in Fig. 2, where men with higher levels of childhood religiosity and maternal warmth had higher levels of adult religiosity (b = 0.24, $p < 0.01$; full results presented in Appendix 3). We also found evidence in support of Path B in Fig. 2, where those with higher levels of adult religiosity had higher mid-life flourishing (b = 0.39, $p < 0.05$; full results presented in Appendix 4).

Thus, given evidence to support both key pathways in Fig. 2, we conducted a *mediated moderation analysis* using a Sobel-Goodman test (Hayes 2013). The Sobel test assesses the product of the coefficient for the interaction term in the prediction of adult religiosity (Path A) and the coefficient for the effect of adult religiosity on midlife flourishing (Path B) net of all study covariates. Results reveal a significant indirect effect of Childhood Religiosity × Maternal Warmth through adult religiosity ($Z = 6.46$, $p < 0.001$), explaining 43% of the moderation effect.

4.2 Later-Life Flourishing Based on 10- and 20-Year Survey Follow-Ups

We considered whether childhood religiosity was longitudinally associated with flourishing, net of flourishing at Wave 1 and our entire host of study covariates. Later-life measures of flourishing are contained in the second and third waves of the MIDUS survey, conducted 10 and 20 years after the baseline wave. We used inverse probability weighting to adjust for sample attrition by assigning the highest weight to respondents that are the least likely to remain in the study between waves. As in the analyses presented in Sect. 4.1, these analyses also adjust for income, region of residence, education, marital status, and religious affiliation in adulthood. We conducted the same series of three models in our gender-stratified sample, with flourishing at Wave 2 and Wave 3 as the outcome variables, respectively.

Results suggest that childhood religiosity was positively associated with flourishing at Wave 2 of MIDUS, for men (b = 0.11, $p < 0.001$, N = 1104) and women (b = 0.09, $p < 0.05$, N = 1150) (see Appendix 5, Table A for men and Table B for women). We also observed the same pattern of statistical interaction that we saw in our main analyses, where maternal warmth strengthened the association between high childhood religiosity and Wave 2 flourishing scores in the male sample only (b = 0.09, $p < 0.05$).

When flourishing at Wave 3 was considered as the outcome variable, men (b = 0.65, $p < 0.05$, N = 677) and women (b = 0.34, $p < 0.05$, N = 733) raised in highly religious childhood homes reported higher flourishing (see Appendix 6, Table A for men and Table B for women for full results). Unlike at Wave 2, however, there was no significant product terms between childhood religiosity and parental warmth. This is not unexpected since over 50% of both the male and female sample was lost to attrition between Wave 1 and Wave 3, and it would be unexpected if maternal warmth continued to modify the effect of childhood religiosity on flourishing for nearly two decades.

5 Discussion

Research into religion and well-being generally has been marked by a focus on specific aspects of mental or physical well-being, and by an emphasis on different stages rather than long stretches of the life course. Scholars are beginning to consider the formative role of childhood religiosity—and are taking more comprehensive approaches to well-being itself. In this study, we contributed to these emerging areas of knowledge by drawing on national longitudinal data encompassing childhood measures and midlife and later-life flourishing. We begin to offer a fuller portrait of how religion may uphold well-being across the lifespan. Taken together, our findings lead us to conclude that any robust effects of religion on flourishing across midlife and later life are likely to be interwoven with family, gender, and other social institutions, suggesting the need for an inter-domain approach to understanding how religion might influence flourishing over the life course.

Results showed that childhood religiosity had a direct positive association with midlife flourishing. High childhood religiosity explained a small proportion of the variance in midlife flourishing scores, which is not unexpected given the many factors that could influence this multidimensional measure of well-being. While this effect size may be categorized as small (Cohen 2013), it is roughly equal in magnitude to those associated with race and age, well-established predictors of flourishing (Keyes 2009), and thus should not be dismissed as trivial. Indeed, for both men and women, those raised in highly religious homes reported midlife flourishing scores that were over one quarter of a standard deviation higher than those raised in non-religious homes. This association was not specific to one subdomain of flourishing, suggesting that childhood religiosity serves a comprehensive foundation for well-being across the life course. This provides further evidence that the salubrious associations widely documented between religion and health may take shape beginning in childhood. What is more, our analyses of 20-year follow-up data collected in 2005 and 2014 found continued positive associations of childhood religiosity with later-life flourishing. Religious identity may bolster self-esteem and self-efficacy (Schieman et al. 2017), provide access to social support (Krause 2006) or allow individuals to reframe challenging circumstances in terms of a greater divine plan. Further, parental bonds may enable children to find comfort and reassurance in God's love and care (Green and Elliot 2010).

Perspectives on religious socialization have long maintained that family and gender imbue the religious experience in ways that fundamentally redirect its ultimate impacts. However, these propositions have yet to be tested with respect to ultimate life-course well-being trajectories. Among men, unique combinations of religiosity and maternal warmth mattered to understanding differences in midlife flourishing. Flourishing among men who grew up in highly religious homes pivoted significantly on the quality of mother–child bonds, more so than those growing up in less-religious homes. Meanwhile, levels of midlife flourishing among men with unfavorable maternal bonds are equivalent regardless of religiosity. These findings integrate and extend previous research finding that the strongest intergenerational transmission of religion occurs between mothers and sons

(Kim-Spoon et. 2012) by revealing emotional bond strength as a potential mechanism by which this occurs (Bao et al. 1999). More broadly, scholars of religion and health have routinely shown that the effects of specific religious elements, such as belief or prayer, are highly dependent on the personal and social contexts in which they occur (Koenig et al. 2012). Though it is well-established that women tend to be more religious than men across all indicators of religious belief and practice (Schnabel 2018), our study adds the role of family to research in the United States finding that religious involvement is associated with improved well-being among men, but not among women (McFarland 2010).

Another key result of our study illuminates the importance of adulthood religious persistence: namely, a combination of childhood religiosity and favorable mother-son bonds appears to enable religious importance in adulthood. Indeed, a mediated-moderation analysis confirmed that adult religious importance mediates links among childhood religious environments, maternal bonds, and midlife flourishing among men in particular. Though the current study could not discern exactly *how* mothers might have socialized sons into a religious faith, relevant maternal involvement could include co-participation in religious services or events, encouragement of faith, or concrete shared activities such as prayer or scripture reading. Moreover, the precise methods or messages that parents employ when presenting religious beliefs to their children may render them more or less effective. For instance, maternal warmth likely also promotes positive images of God, such as God being a loving companion along a life journey (Dickie et al. 2006). In turn, recent evidence suggests that children presented with more positive images of God were more religious as adults (Tratner et al. 2020), both of which associate with greater levels of well-being (Homan 2014). Prior research has also documented that stably high levels of religiosity from childhood to adulthood is optimal for well-being relative to consistent non-involvement (Upenieks and Schafer 2020), but the results of the current study suggests that religious stability over the life course has differing effects for flourishing for men than for women.

In contrast to the findings for maternal influences, we found no evidence that paternal warmth shaped the association between childhood religiosity and flourishing. This is not entirely unexpected, as adult men are less religious than women (Schnabel 2018) and often take a secondary or distant role in the faith-building of their children (Boyatzis 2006).

Several limitations of the current study deserve mention. First, the MIDUS data contained a single item retrospective measure of childhood religiosity, and the host of questions about parental warmth asked respondents to recall their childhood. Thus, recall bias could be an issue. However, prior work using the supplemental MIDUS twin sample suggests that the level of correspondence for childhood religiosity between twins raised in the same home was 72%, similar to levels of correspondence for recall of parental education levels (Upenieks et al. 2019). Previous research has also suggested that concerns about respondent recall of parental warmth may be minimal (Reuben et al. 2016). And despite the retrospective nature of these measures, MIDUS is the only data set we are aware of that contains a comprehensive measure of human flourishing across all of the decades of midlife and later life while also querying childhood characteristics pertaining to both family and religion.

Second, although we controlled for a number of childhood factors, specific processes surrounding the formation of parent–child bonds and childhood religiosity are not made clear in our national data. For instance, parents with mental health problems are less effective in transmitting religion to their children (Stearns and McKinney 2018) and are also less likely to show warmth towards their children (Franck and Buehler 2007). Likewise, although we adjusted for residential density growing up, childhood religiosity is more likely to form in historically religious communities or enclaves. Although our analyses are weighted to help ensure representativeness, the MIDUS cohort that comprised our study population was primarily non-Hispanic white. Most MIDUS respondents were raised in the first half of the twentieth century, where religion may have played a stronger part in child socialization (Edgell et al. 2006). Today, younger U.S. cohorts are less religious than prior generations, as religious affiliation, church attendance, and belief in God have all declined relative to older cohorts. For instance, in 2016, 45% of adults aged 18–30 said they had no doubt about God's existence, compared with 68% of those aged 65 and older (Voas and Chaves 2016). Since MIDUS surveyed midlife Americans, whether our findings are applicable to more recent and more racially and ethnically diverse cohorts of children in the United States remains an open question. It will also be important for future research to consider if the results of our study are generalizable to countries beyond the United States. The United States is often considered unusually religious compared to other Western, industrialized nations (Bader and Finke 2010). There is some evidence that personal religiosity has a greater impact on aspects of subjective well-being, including life satisfaction and positive and negative affect (Diener, Tay, and Myers 2011; Eichhorn 2012) in countries where religion figures prominently in public life and culture. Moreover, our key findings concerning parent–child bonds may be culturally specific, given a common tendency to personalize God within the distinctive religious culture of the United States.

Third, religiosity is a multi-dimensional construct. Aspects of religiosity extend beyond the subjective salience or importance of religion, our focus here. Individuals may derive benefits to well-being from attendance or participation in their religious community, the strength of their own religious identity, or the particular set of beliefs they hold. As such, religiosity may have an influence on flourishing extending beyond the subjective importance of religion.

6 Conclusion

This study is among the first to examine how impressions of childhood religiosity relate to human flourishing decades after childhood. Moving beyond positive or nurturing aspects of parent–child relationships, future research should assess whether childhood religiosity might facilitate higher levels of flourishing in part by buffering the noxious consequences of childhood adversity, such as abuse (e.g., Kuhn and Brulé 2019). In addition, not every aspect of religiosity as a social and institutional experience is strictly beneficial for well-being, illuminating aspects of the "dark side" of religion (e.g., Ellison and Lee 2010). Some expressions of religiosity may portend authoritarianism or abuse within families. Beliefs closely associated with conservative Protestantism, including hierarchical images of God and belief in a literal Hell, have been linked to severe punishment practices (Ellison and Bradshaw 2009), which can have negative long-term consequences for well-being (Mulvaney and Mebert 2010). Future research with more extensive measures of religiosity should probe its many dimensions to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of whether and when religion may place flourishing at risk. Overall, we found that childhood religiosity may be an asset that promotes comprehensive emotional, psychological, and social flourishing at midlife among U.S. adults, and that positive parental bonds may strengthen this association.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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