

Article

“A Godly Man, a Family Man”: Religiosity, Eudaimonic Well-Being, and Positive Outcomes in Black Masculinity and Fatherhood

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Abstract

How do the frameworks of religion and spirituality influence perceptions of what it means to be a Black man and a family man? This study explores how increases in religiosity and spirituality influence Black masculinity and fatherhood among 33 Black Christian couples ($n = 66$). Qualitative interviews and analysis examine how religious beliefs and practices may facilitate shifts from independence-centered views of masculinity to family-oriented, spiritually grounded ideals. Participants described how deepened religiosity and spirituality were perceived as assisting with greater marital fidelity, fatherly involvement, and relational commitment, regardless of denominational affiliation, socioeconomic status, or education. Key mechanisms included (1) personal crises and faith community engagement, (2) divine interventions, (3) scripture study, and (4) recovering traditional religious masculinity roles. Findings suggest that religion and spirituality may provide an alternative framework for Black masculinity, one that emphasizes relationality, moral integrity, and family leadership. These processes are interpreted through Ryff's six-factor model of eudaimonic well-being and mapped onto positive psychology constructs such as resilience, meaning-making, and the sanctification of family roles.

Keywords: religion; spirituality; Black masculinity; fatherhood; eudaimonic well-being; Ryff's model; positive psychology; resilience; sanctification



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1. Introduction

Contemporary media and cultural narratives frequently portray Black¹ men through a deficit lens—as absent fathers, crime statistics, or embodiments of hypermasculine stereotypes—reinforcing harmful narratives that overlook strengths, relational capacities, and positive contributions to family life (Coles and Green 2010). Empirical data from national sources document disproportionate rates of father absence, non-marital childbirth, and incarceration among Black men and boys (e.g., Vespa et al. 2013; Martin et al. 2017; Alexander 2012). While these patterns are real and consequential, they tell only part of the story. Far less attention has been given to Black men who demonstrate sustained, engaged, and generative leadership within their families (Fincham et al. 2011).

The opening lines of Coles and Green's (2010) edited volume, *The Myth of the Missing Black Father*, capture this common perception:

The Black male. A demographic. A sociological construct. A media caricature. A crime statistic. Aside from rage and lust, he is seldom seen as an emotionally embodied person.

Rarely a father. Indeed, if one judged by popular and academic coverage, one might think the term “black fatherhood” is an oxymoron. In their parenting role, African American men are viewed as verbs not nouns; that is, it is frequently assumed that Black men father children but seldom are fathers. . . Black men have become the symbol of fatherlessness. (p. 1)

This representation is particularly damaging in the context of family life, where Black men are often depicted as physically, emotionally, or psychologically absent (Kumah-Abiwu 2020; McLeod 1999). Yet committed and relationally engaged Black male presence in the home remains understudied from a strengths-based perspective (Griffith et al. 2021; Fincham et al. 2011). Few studies have examined how Black men who are deeply committed to both faith and family conceptualize and enact masculinity as both a “Godly man” and a “family man.”

In contrast to the contemporary deficit view, positive psychology offers a strengths-based lens that emphasizes resilience, virtue development, meaning-making, and eudaimonic well-being rather than pathology or deficit models of examination (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000; Ryff 2014). Eudaimonic well-being, operationalized through Ryff’s six-factor model (purpose in life, personal growth, autonomy, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and positive relations with others), provides a robust framework for understanding how individuals realize their full potential. Religion and spirituality frequently serve as powerful vehicles for these outcomes, fostering sacred meaning, post-traumatic growth, character strengths, and deep relational commitment (Mahoney et al. 2003; Park et al. 2017).

The present study addresses this gap by exploring how religion and spirituality may offer an alternative framework for Black masculinity—one that emphasizes relationality, moral integrity, and family leadership rather than isolation, dominance, or deficit. Drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews with 33 highly religious Black Christian couples ($n = 66$), we examine the processes through which participants perceived increases in religiosity and spirituality as facilitating shifts from independence-centered orientations toward more family-oriented and spiritually grounded ideals of manhood. These processes are interpreted through the lens of eudaimonic well-being (Ryff 1989) and related positive psychology constructs, including resilience, post-traumatic growth, meaning-making, and the sanctification of family roles.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Black Masculinity and Prevailing Narratives

Negative societal messages—amplified by media, statistics on school discipline and incarceration, and structural racism—often confine Black masculinity to narrow stereotypes of athleticism, aggression, criminality, or hypersexuality (Alexander 2012; Collins 2004; Ferber 2007; Ferguson 2010; Saint-Aubin 2002; Wallace 2002). These portrayals, as Coles and Green (2010) powerfully document, reduce Black men to “verbs not nouns”—fathering children but seldom serving as engaged fathers. This view of Black men reinforces a deficit-oriented narrative that overlooks strengths, relational capacities, and positive contributions to family life. Cooper (2006) further critiques the “bipolar” framing of Black masculinity that oscillates between threat and entertainment, leaving little room for holistic understandings of the mind, heart, and spirit of Black men. Traditional research in Black Masculinity studies has largely remained problem-focused, emphasizing structural barriers and hegemonic ideals rather than potentials for flourishing (Wallace 2002). Positive psychology counters this deficit lens by emphasizing strengths, resilience, and flourishing. Central to this perspective is Ryff’s (2014) multidimensional model of eudaimonic well-being, which conceptualizes psychological flourishing through six core dimensions:

purpose in life, personal growth, autonomy, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and positive relations with others. Religion and spirituality serve as key resources in Black communities, buffering stress, promoting adaptive coping, and supporting mental and family well-being (Marks et al. 2005; Taylor et al. 2004). Yet few studies have applied Ryff's eudaimonic framework to Black masculinity and fatherhood, representing a significant gap this study seeks to address.

2.2. Religion, Spirituality, and Black Masculinity

African Americans consistently report high levels of religious involvement (Wilcox and Wolfinger 2016). Research links religiosity to disengagement from "street life" in favor of family-oriented living (Ebstein King 2003; Marks et al. 2005; Wilcox and Wolfinger 2008). Faith fosters a distinctive masculinity centered on spousal and parental roles rather than dominance or leisure (Wilcox and Wolfinger 2008). This study argues that religiosity offers a particularly helpful pathway for Black men by cultivating eudaimonic well-being. Through sacred meaning-making, religious frameworks help men foster greater relational fulfillment and happiness. Eudaimonic well-being is tied to achieving greater purpose in life (family leadership as a divine calling), fostering personal growth (virtue development and maturation), increasing autonomy (freedom from hegemonic stereotypes), finding self-acceptance (honest acknowledgment of past failings redeemed by grace), encouraging environmental mastery (navigating racism and stressors through faith communities), and promoting positive relations with others (interdependent family and congregational bonds) (Ryff 2014; Mahoney et al. 2003).

Despite growing attention to religion in Black communities, Black Masculinity studies have largely overlooked these eudaimonic processes. Most scholarship remains focused on structural barriers or hegemonic ideals, with little exploration of how religiosity can promote psychological flourishing and alternative masculinities (Hopkins 2007; Griffith et al. 2021; Wallace 2002). The present study fills this void by applying Ryff's model to examine how religiosity facilitates eudaimonic growth in Black masculine and fatherhood identities.

2.3. Religion, Spirituality, and Fatherhood

Broader research shows religiosity enhances father involvement, parental supervision, affection, and commitment (Bartkowski and Xu 2000; King 2003; Wilcox 2002). Church attendance and faith practices correlate with stronger parent-child bonds and family stability, serving as sources of strength amid challenges (Dollahite et al. 1998, 2002). Spiritually grounded fathering promotes eudaimonic well-being by sanctifying family roles—imbuing them with sacred meaning—and fostering gratitude, compassion, self-transcendence, purpose, and resilience, all central to Ryff's model (Mahoney et al. 2003; Park et al. 2017). These processes are especially helpful for men navigating societal pressures on Black fatherhood, offering a pathway to personal growth, environmental mastery, and positive relations that hegemonic masculinity often precludes.

2.4. Religion, Spirituality, Black Fatherhood, and Family Well-Being

Black families face disproportionate stressors (e.g., poverty, racism, fragile family structures), with nearly 58% of Black children living apart from their biological fathers and high rates of non-marital births (Vespa et al. 2013; Martin et al. 2017; McLanahan 2009). Earlier studies focused almost exclusively on deficits in Black male leadership in the home (Allen and Connor 1997). Yet religiosity draws Black families to institutions offering guidance, support, and pro-family ideals (Edgell 2005; Marks et al. 2010). Faith communities uniquely scaffold men toward marital fidelity, emotional availability, and active fathering—factors tied to better child outcomes, parental mental health, and relational flourishing (Blackman et al. 2005; Skipper et al. 2018; Skipper et al. 2021; Wilcox and Wolfinger 2007,

2008). By promoting Ryff's eudaimonic dimensions—particularly purpose-driven family leadership, autonomy in moral decision-making, self-acceptance amid past challenges, and positive relations—religiosity provides a culturally resonant resource that counters deficit-focused narratives in Black Masculinity studies.

Qualitative insights highlight rejecting bachelor mindsets, leveraging family/faith support, and deepening spousal bonds, often intertwined with religious engagement (Marks et al. 2010). By focusing on positive exemplars—couples who self-identified as highly religious and reported strong, stable marriages—we adopt a capabilities-focused approach that counters prevailing deficit narratives. This strengths-based orientation aligns with calls in positive psychology and the study of religion and family life to examine how faith practices and spiritual experiences promote flourishing, particularly within historically marginalized communities (Marks et al. 2010; Wilcox and Wolfinger 2007, 2008; Pargament and Mahoney 2005). The present study addresses this gap through a qualitative, strengths-based examination of highly religious Black Christian couples. An examination of the rigorous analytic process and methods used to discern potential patterns is presented below.

3. Materials and Methods

Using in-depth interviews and qualitative scientific analysis, this study examines the role religion and spirituality play in the lives of 33 men and their wives ($n = 66$) relating to perceptions of masculinity and fatherhood. The study examines the lived experience of highly religious Black American men and their wives to provide a strengths-based approach regarding how and why religion and spirituality may influence their masculinity and fatherhood within the context of family life. This study seeks to deeply and qualitatively explore the processes and mechanisms that reveal how and why religion and spirituality may function in the lives of highly religious Black men and their families from across the United States.

Sample

Using the African American Families of Faith Data Set, a subsection of the national American Families of Faith Project ($n = 200$ families), the sample consisted of in-depth interviews with multi-denominational Christian Black couples in the United States. The sample includes 33 heterosexual married couples who self-identified as Black or African American (33 couples, $n = 66$). Participants represented various Christian faith backgrounds and affiliations, including Catholic, Protestant, Latter-day Saint (LDS), and Non-Denominational. All participants were purposively sampled from across the United States (California, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Ohio, Oregon, Washington, and Wisconsin).

On average, couples had been married 20 years and had 3.3 children (all had at least one child). Husbands' mean age was 56; wives' mean age was 54. Educational attainment ranged from no high school diploma to advanced graduate degrees. Individuals were selected based on both spouses self-reporting high levels of religious belief, importance, and commitment, as well as self-reporting to be in happy marriages and positive family situations. Participants were similarly rated high in both religious importance/commitment and positive family functioning by referring clergy or institutional gatekeepers. The sample was characterized by religious diversity (within Christianity), a wide range of socioeconomic and educational levels, a generally high level of religious commitment (as reported by referring clergy and participants), and geographical diversity.

Sampling Rationale and Religiosity Assessment: By focusing on positive exemplars—couples who self-identified as highly religious and reported strong, stable marriages—we

adopt a capabilities-focused approach that counters prevailing deficit narratives while illuminating specific mechanisms (personal crises, faith community support, divine interventions, and scripture study) through which religion and spirituality can support transformative shifts in masculine identity and fatherhood. This strengths-based orientation aligns with calls in positive psychology and the study of religion and family life to examine how faith practices and spiritual experiences promote flourishing, virtue cultivation, and relational well-being, particularly within historically marginalized communities (Marks et al. 2010; Wilcox and Wolfinger 2007, 2008; Pargament and Mahoney 2005).

Religiosity was operationalized through the following purposive criteria: (a) self-reported high religious belief, importance, and commitment by both spouses; (b) self-reported happy marriages and positive family functioning; and (c) independent corroboration by referring clergy or institutional gatekeepers who rated the couple high on both religious commitment and positive family life. No standardized quantitative religiosity inventory or scale was administered. Selection was qualitative and theory-driven to allow for in-depth exploration of lived experience and transformative processes.

Data Collection: After informed consent and basic demographic information were gathered, “intensive interviewing” was employed with each couple in their home (Marks 2015). Interviews were conducted in the presence of both husband and wife, with each participant responding to the same questions in turn. Preferential order was altered across questions so that each spouse had the opportunity to respond first. Although interviewing couples together can sometimes limit authenticity on sensitive topics, it also provides unique richness about interactive couple processes that cannot be observed in individual interviews (Marks et al. 2008). Interviews typically lasted 1.5 to 2.5 h and followed a 30-question semi-structured protocol with follow-up probes as needed. A narrative-style approach was used to elicit contextualized responses. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, yielding more than 1000 single-spaced pages of transcripts.

Data Analysis: After transcription, data were analyzed using grounded theory and open coding (Corbin and Strauss 2008), allowing themes and concepts to emerge inductively from the data. Rigorous, systematic coding followed Marks’ (2015) Numeric Content Analysis (NCA) strategy, which includes four phases designed to enhance validity, reliability, and replicability through an audit trail of decisions.

Phases 1 and 2 involved open coding of the transcribed data to identify salient, recurring ideas within and across interviews. Phase 3 consisted of axial coding, in which coded data were sifted to separate “rocks” (core, content-rich themes) from “gems” (valuable but less central material) and “pretenders” (vague or disconnected data). Core themes were identified by prevalence and prominence. Phase 4 involved selective coding, in which representative quotes were chosen and arranged to preserve participants’ own words and lived experiences while illustrating the processes and mechanisms (the “hows” and “whys”) behind the identified themes.

Theoretical Interpretation and Eudaimonic Well-Being Framework: The primary analysis was fully inductive. Ryff’s (1989) model of eudaimonic well-being was not used as a theoretical framework, interview guide, or coding scheme at any point during data collection or initial analysis. Only after the inductive themes had fully emerged from participants’ narratives was Ryff’s six-dimension model (self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, positive relations with others, environmental mastery, and autonomy) applied as a post hoc interpretive lens. This allowed us to connect the lived experiences and perceived transformative processes described by participants to established positive psychology constructs of eudaimonic well-being, resilience, meaning-making, and relational flourishing. This analytic approach preserves the integrity of the grounded-theory process while enabling theoretically rich interpretation that links participants’ experiences to broader studies on

religion, spirituality, masculinity, fatherhood, and positive psychology (Marks et al. 2010; Wilcox and Wolfinger 2007, 2008; Pargament and Mahoney 2005).

4. Results (Findings)

Data analysis revealed that participants often recognized and articulated a conflict between what they described as a “worldly” conception of masculinity and a “godly” one. With a perceived deepening of their own personal religiosity and spirituality, many described a shift in their attitudes about masculinity—moving from a perspective that emphasized dominance, disconnectedness, and defiance toward one that highlighted the importance of developing and maintaining meaningful relationships with God and with family. This shift, as they recounted it, affected both their internal attitudes and their external behaviors.

Participants described several mechanisms that contributed to what they experienced as personal spiritual growth and maturity. These mechanisms included (1) personal crises in which they recognized a dependence on God and a greater religious community, (2) experiences they attributed to divine intervention, (3) engagement with Christian scripture, and (4) rediscovering traditional religious roles and responsibilities. Many summarized the outcomes of this process as (1) a greater willingness to embrace what they called a “godly” or spiritual aspect of masculinity and (2) increased devotion to marriage and fatherhood as central elements of being a family man.

The following interview excerpts illustrate the processes and mechanisms participants described. Many were familiar with and had been exposed to what they called the “street-life mentality” that was often present in their environments. They characterized this worldview as being anti-family and anti-God.

4.1. Personal Crises and Communities of Faith

Participants frequently noted that personal crises led them to search for new and more meaningful approaches to life. Gavin from Oregon shared how a personal crisis, combined with the support of a spiritual community, contributed to what he experienced as a transformation in his masculine identity:

I was basically a good guy. Fundamentally, [deep down, I was] a good guy, but I got caught up in outward things. I got in trouble. I single-handedly almost destroyed [my] whole marriage, years back. [I even] had outside things [with other women] going on. Then it all came falling down at once. I hit rock bottom and lost everything, my job, everything, all that stuff. [I] got exposed for what I really was. I had nowhere else to go. But I was fortunate that it was people who were Christian who saved me. They found me out there floating around out in the middle of the river, almost. That started the [change]. It's like my whole world changed. It's still not easy, but I can see where all that other stuff leads you. I can see where it's leading a lot of men, even nice guys, young guys. It's not easy, but you got to have that faith. The spiritual side has really helped to give me that strength to fight things. It's still not easy. I still get influenced. [Becoming a godly man and a family man,] is a challenge, because it goes against the grain. Most religions go against the grain of outside society. That means giving up a lot of things. You can't go both ways. Religion goes counter to everything I've grown up thinking guys should be able to do.

Gavin connected his increased religiosity with marital fidelity and growth. His wife, Beth, observed a positive change in him after this period:

He was extremely impulsive and selfish [before], very singularly absorbed. [He] just couldn't even see anything beyond what he wanted for himself, [or] according to how he did it. So that has changed from that time. Being able to listen and support, because

before, he just wasn't even listening, period. [But after his spiritual growth,] then there was listening [and he] actually [gives] support. He understands the process. So, I think [that's] all part of his growth and maturity, spiritually.

Another wife, Tiffany from Louisiana, described a similar gradual transformation in her husband through life crises and ongoing spiritual growth:

He's gone from being a very selfish, into-himself-type individual, into more of a giving, supportive, loving individual. He has improved over the years, but it's been a constant change that has taken place. It's not like it just happened all at once, it has been a constant growth, with each situation. With each life crisis that we've had to deal with, and even with the good things too. It has just been a slow process of growth.

Brent, a Non-Denominational Christian from Louisiana, described how his understanding of his relationship with and dependence on God—which developed through church attendance and involvement in a faith community—dramatically changed his actions and priorities:

[When I started] going to church, I could see [God working] through me. The Lord [also] went through [my wife], worked on her, to work on me. I had to come to reality. If you [are] in the world, that's all you know, [the] things of the world. That's all you know. That's all you care about is what people in the world say. But once God changes your life, you don't care what they say. When you please him, when a man and his household please God, guess what, everything else will fall in place. Everything else will fall in line. That's what I had to learn. I had to learn who was in charge. God was in charge of my life, [and] I was in charge of my family. From now until this day, that's how things go.

Reta, a Methodist from Delaware, described how her focus on God initially created conflict with her husband, who at the time was more focused on what she called “the street life.” As he became more involved in religious practices, she observed changes in his approach to family life:

I remember when we were talking about getting married and I told him that God is always first in my life, and he would have to be the second man. I don't think that went over that well. But over the years, he came to accept that fact. [But] it was really rocky [at first], we didn't have that harmony in the beginning. Now we talk about everything. Before, we couldn't, because he was living a life that I didn't agree with, and that was a conflict between us. He would have to make me mad enough for me to let him go out with his boys. There was always a conflict between us. He had his life, and I had mine. Not an adulterous life, or anything like that, but not together. We were married but not together. He was still “single.” Once we got into our spirituality and our [shared] religion, we understood that God meant for man to have [marriage and family], and it influences everything we do.

4.2. Divine Interventions

Some participants described experiences they attributed to divine intervention—moments in which they felt God gave them a new way of seeing and being without a direct act of will on their part. Brian, a Non-Denominational Christian from Louisiana, recalled such an experience that shifted his focus from “the world” to his family:

When I was in the world, I was hanging around negative people, and I fed off that. I put friendship before family, and it had me out in that world. I was gone. I mean, I would put friends before my wife, my kids, but God had to switch that thing around. [I] thought [I was] chasing something. But [I realized] you really weren't chasing anything. All I was chasing was [my family] life going away. I mean, misusing my family, treating the world like they were on top.

Brent similarly described God changing his life and realigning his priorities, which he said directly impacted his marriage:

[It] was the challenge of my life, to give up the streets in order to come to where I needed to be. I thought it was a challenge, but it really wasn't [a] challenge. God had to change my life, my priorities, and get it lined up right, and once God lined my priorities up, then everything started working the way it was supposed to be in my marriage.

4.3. Experiences with God's Word

A number of participants described how engagement with scripture they regarded as holy altered their self-perception and their understanding of masculine identity. CJ, a Christian from Louisiana, spoke about how approaching life through the lens of sacred scripture deepened his relationship with Christ and with his family:

I was an only child in a single parent household. So, I wanted a family. I wanted a lot of kids. Family was important to me, but I just didn't understand the mechanism by which it could happen, until I came to know the Lord. So, having a relationship with Christ, and seeing from the word of God, that there's not one situation that my family has encountered that it isn't already written about [in scripture]. [I had to learn to] follow the road map, and it has meant everything.

John, a Christian man from Oregon, described how engaging with scripture challenged traditional views of masculinity by emphasizing loyalty and fidelity:

It's a challenge every day. To follow God's word, to be more like Him. We make mistakes daily. And with that in mind, we have to somewhat stay focused on what God has you to do, to being loyal and faithful to His work. And you are challenged every day when you wake up to fulfill that obligation. It's important, [but] that's a tough challenge.

Lamon, a Non-Denominational Christian from Louisiana, referenced biblical passages to describe the transformation he experienced:

The day I found the Lord, it changed my walk, my talk, and everything else. When I got into it, I didn't realize what was happening at first. So, I got into the word and read the word. The word tells you that if you're going to be a disciple of mine you've got to first deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. Then you've got to do that. If you read in Romans, Romans tells you that when you know these things you've got to be transformed, you're a new creature. So old things are passed away. Like if you were chasing women, [and] couldn't nobody tell you nothing, [then] all that is [done] away with. You don't like to do those things no more. It's a new thing. Christ will change you. He'll make you do what He says to do.

4.4. Recovering Traditional Religious Masculine Roles

Participants described changes in how they labeled and understood their own identity as men. Lester from Oregon spoke about how studying about God illuminated responsibilities and roles he held as a man:

My religious faith has really increased and enlarged in the last years. The more that I study about my Creator, it really kind of outlines my role as the head of the family and what my responsibilities are. And what that means to me, is to really embrace them with all the heart and all the love that I have. And that the life that I have, and the world that I live in, sometimes are opposing each other. Because this world tries to pull people apart, but through my religious faith, I'm able to hold my family and the people I love together, because I know that there's a force that's working against love, peace, and harmony.

Sam, a Seventh-day Adventist from Louisiana, articulated a sense of connectedness between his role as “spiritual head” of the family and his role as material provider, while acknowledging the reality that many single mothers also carry these responsibilities:

Really [my wife] doesn't encounter and deal with having to pay bills and focus on the everyday circumstances of everyday life [the same way I do, as a man]. These are problems that males [have to deal with more often.] I'm not just saying [only men], ... [the] male, or [the] father, have to go through [this stress.] [Sometimes] you have single parent homes with the mother having to deal with trying to provide for her kids. Those are things [that] a [single-]parent deal[s] with too. But as a male, these are some of the things as a spiritual head of the family, [or] the household, [that] we deal with. All we need is support a lot of times to really make it through every day. And if the male would have that [support] it would be a lot easier, you know, in everyday life. [My relationship with God and my marriage] plays a [big] part [of who I am.] We do everything [together] (referring to his wife). We do everything [together] in one accord. She supports me, I support her, and Christ supports both of us.

Lester spoke of how his religious beliefs offered him a new standard by which to judge his success as a man:

Yeah, [my faith] reinforces [my belief] that I have a greater role and responsibility than I ever thought. There is a higher standard. There is a much higher standard I've learned about. [My faith helps me understand] what that standard means. [I have come to understand] this life that I have. I must give my life for my family. And there's no limit to what I should give to my family, [or] that I should be willing to give to my family. And I've been challenged by that. I've been tested by that [new standard]. And you know, through the strength of my Creator, I've been able to keep my family together.

4.5. Summary of Findings

The men in this study described a process of spiritual growth that involved leaving behind what they characterized as the psychological mindset and behavioral patterns of the street life (selfishness, hedonism, withdrawal from family responsibility). At the same time, they described embracing changes in internal moral character (honesty, openness, sexual fidelity, and a selfless concern for others) as well as increased participation in religious and spiritual practices (church attendance, prayer, and scripture study). They attributed this process to exposure to scripture, recognition of the limitations of “worldly” lifestyles, participation in communities of faith, and experiences they understood as the grace of God.

Closely tied to this spiritual growth process, participants described a shift toward a more family-centered and relationally centered perception of manhood. This “family man” ideal centered on deeper commitment to, and greater physical, spiritual, and emotional availability toward, spouse and children, as well as placing God and family above other relationships. Many participants described a positive relationship between increased religious and spiritual commitment and increased marital and familial commitment. In sum, relationality rather than isolation characterized the approach to masculinity that participants described—an approach focused on establishing and maintaining relationships both upward toward God and outward toward spouse and family.

5. Discussion

The decision to interpret the findings through the lens of Ryff's (1989, 2014) model of eudaimonic well-being was made after the inductive analysis was complete. This post hoc interpretive approach is consistent with established qualitative practices in which researchers first allow themes to emerge from participants' lived experiences and only subsequently bring established theoretical frameworks into dialogue with those themes

(Corbin and Strauss 2008; Marks 2015). Ryff’s six-dimensional model of psychological well-being—self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, positive relations with others, environmental mastery, and autonomy—provides a robust, empirically validated framework from positive psychology for understanding how individuals construct meaningful, relationally grounded lives (Ryff 1989; Keyes 2002; Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000). Because the men in this study explicitly described processes of personal transformation, deepened relationships, new life purpose, and responsible family leadership, Ryff’s model offers a particularly fitting interpretive tool for illuminating the eudaimonic dimensions of the shifts they reported. This approach aligns with recent calls in the literature on religion, spirituality, and well-being to integrate positive psychology frameworks with qualitative accounts of how faith practices support flourishing, especially within Black families and communities (Mattis 2002; Marks et al. 2010; Wilcox and Wolfinger 2007, 2008; Pargament and Mahoney 2005).

Before turning to the specific mappings, it is important to address the language participants used to describe their former orientations. Several men referred to what they called the “street-life mentality.” While this term could, if taken out of context, risk reproducing deficit narratives, we use it here strictly as participants’ own retrospective description of worldviews and behavioral patterns they actively sought to leave behind through their faith. Our analysis emphasizes the transformative power of religion and spirituality in enabling these shifts rather than pathologizing the men or their communities. This framing is consistent with strengths-based approaches in Black masculinity and fatherhood research that seek to counter deficit portrayals by highlighting agency, resilience, and positive change (Coles and Green 2010; Marks et al. 2010; Skipper et al. 2021).

5.1. Connecting Emergent Themes to Eudaimonic Well-Being Dimensions

The inductive analysis yielded four primary mechanisms through which participants experienced and described transformation in their masculine identities: (1) personal crises and involvement in communities of faith, (2) experiences they attributed to divine intervention, (3) engagement with sacred scripture, and (4) recovery of traditional religious masculine roles centered on family responsibility. Below we connect each of these themes onto Ryff’s six dimensions of eudaimonic well-being, drawing directly on participants’ own words and connecting the findings to relevant research on positive psychology, religion and spirituality, and Black family studies.

5.2. Personal Crises, Communities of Faith, and Well-Being

Participants repeatedly described personal crises as catalysts for reevaluating their lives and turning toward God and family. Gavin’s account of hitting “rock bottom,” losing his job and nearly his marriage, and then being “saved” by a Christian community illustrates several Ryff dimensions simultaneously. His experience maps strongly onto Personal Growth (recognizing past patterns and choosing a different path) and Positive Relations with Others (being supported by and then contributing to a faith community). His wife Beth’s observation that he moved from being “extremely impulsive and selfish” to someone who “actually gives support” further underscores personal growth in relational capacities.

These accounts align with research showing that religious communities can serve as critical sources of social support and meaning-making during life crises, particularly for Black men navigating multiple stressors (Mattis 2002; Skipper et al. 2018). The shift from isolation to interdependence described by Reta and her husband also reflects movement along Ryff’s dimension of Autonomy—not as radical independence, but as the capacity to choose a relational, value-driven life course in the face of cultural pressures. This nuanced understanding of autonomy resonates with positive psychology literature on relational

autonomy and eudaimonic well-being in collectivist and faith-oriented contexts (Ryff and Singer 2008; Keyes 2002).

5.3. Divine Intervention, Meaning, and Purpose

Brian and Brent's descriptions of God "switching things around" and realigning their priorities speak directly to Ryff's dimension of Purpose in Life. Both men moved from what they described as chasing "the world" to embracing responsibility for their wives and children as a central life purpose. This reorientation is consistent with research on sanctification—the process by which individuals perceive aspects of life (including family roles) as having sacred or divine significance—which has been linked to greater investment in marital and parental roles (Moore et al. 2021; Pargament and Mahoney 2005; Mahoney et al. 2003).

The sense of being redirected by a higher power also relates to Environmental Mastery—the capacity to manage one's environment and create conditions that support one's values. Participants described moving from feeling controlled by external ("worldly") pressures to actively ordering their lives around faith and family. This finding echoes Wilcox and Wolfinger's (2008) work on how religious institutions cultivate a distinctive form of masculinity achieved through successful performance of spousal and parental roles.

5.4. Scripture Engagement, Self-Acceptance, and Growth

CJ's description of scripture as a "road map" for family life and Lamon's account of being "transformed" and becoming "a new creature" map onto Self-Acceptance and Personal Growth. Both men described moving from old patterns (promiscuity, selfishness, "chasing women") to new identities grounded in humility, discipline, and relationship with God. John's emphasis on the daily challenge of being "loyal and faithful" further illustrates the ongoing nature of personal growth.

These narratives are consistent with research on how engagement with sacred texts can facilitate meaning-making, identity reconstruction, and post-traumatic growth following life difficulties (Park 2010; Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004). For these participants, scripture did not function merely as moral instruction but as a transformative resource for re-authoring their sense of self and purpose.

5.5. Religious Masculine Roles, Environmental Mastery, and Positive Relations

Lester and Sam's articulations of their roles as "head of the family" and "spiritual head" who must "give my life for my family" and provide both materially and spiritually reflect strong alignment with Environmental Mastery (creating stable conditions for the family) and Positive Relations with Others (interdependence with spouse and divine support). Sam's description of mutual support between husband, wife, and Christ exemplifies the relational dimension of eudaimonic well-being. These findings resonate with research on generative fathering and responsible fatherhood in religious contexts, particularly among African American men (Dollahite et al. 1998; Marks et al. 2010; Wilcox 2002).

5.6. Summary Table: Emergent Themes and Ryff's Eudaimonic Dimensions

Table 1 summarizes the connections between the four religious mechanisms identified through inductive analysis and Ryff's six dimensions of eudaimonic well-being. The purpose of the table is to provide a concise, structured overview of how participants' accounts of personal crises and faith communities, divine intervention, scripture engagement, and religious masculine roles map onto the six elements of Ryff's model (i.e., self-acceptance, personal growth, purpose in life, positive relations with others, environmental mastery, and autonomy). Each cell pairs a direct participant quotation with a brief interpretive summary drawn from the analysis. Blank cells indicate mechanism–dimension pairings

for which no strong connection was evident in the data. By organizing these selective, data-grounded linkages, the table synthesizes the findings and further clarifies the rationale for the post-hoc application of Ryff’s model illuminating the eudaimonic dimensions of the transformative processes the couples described.

Table 1. Summary of connections between religious mechanisms and Ryff’s six dimensions of eudaimonic well-being. Each cell contains direct participant quotes followed by a brief interpretive summary drawn from the analysis.

Religious Mechanism	Self-Acceptance	Personal Growth	Purpose in Life	Positive Relations	Environmental Mastery	Autonomy
Personal Crises and Faith Communities		“Hit rock bottom. . . people who were Christian who saved me” → Recognition of past patterns and choice of new path		“moved from being. . . selfish. . . into more of a giving, supportive” + supported by faith community → Relational reorientation towards support and connection		“He had his life and I had mine” and “still single” to “shared religious life” → Emphasizes a choice towards a shared spiritual path over previous conflict and separate lives
Divine Interventions			“God had to switch that thing around”/“God had to change my life, my priorities” → Reoriented life toward family as central purpose		Moved from feeling controlled by “the world” to actively ordering life around faith and family responsibility	
Scripture Engagement	“transformed. . . a new creature”; “old things are passed away” → New identity and self-understanding	“Follow the road map”; daily challenge “to be loyal and faithful” → Ongoing growth in character and commitment				
Religious Masculine Roles				“Christ supports both of us” + mutual support with wife → Interdependent relational well-being	“head of the family”; “give my life for my family” and provide stability → Environmental Mastery of both self and family relationships	

Note: Table 1 entries are interpretive and derived from participants’ own descriptions of transformation. Blank cells indicate no strong connection was highlighted in the data for that mechanism–dimension pairing.

5.7. Implications for Black Masculinity, Fatherhood, and Positive Psychology

Taken together, these findings suggest that religion and spirituality can function as powerful resources for constructing alternative, relationally oriented masculinities among Black Christian men. Rather than measuring success primarily through athletic, sexual, or economic dominance—narratives often amplified in media and some cultural discourses—participants described success in terms of fidelity, sacrificial love, spiritual leadership, and emotional presence with their wives and children. This alternative framework directly counters deficit portrayals of Black fatherhood while offering a culturally resonant pathway to eudaimonic well-being.

These results contribute to positive psychology by demonstrating how religious and spiritual practices can facilitate the cultivation of character strengths (fidelity, humility, self-regulation) and the experience of meaning and purpose, particularly in the context of family relationships (Peterson and Seligman 2004; Park 2010). They also extend research on Black masculinity by showing how faith can serve as a counter-narrative to hegemonic or “street” masculinities, supporting calls for more nuanced, strengths-based scholarship on Black men and families (Coles and Green 2010; Wallace 2002; Skipper et al. 2021).

Finally, the bidirectional relationship participants described between spiritual growth and relational commitment echoes findings in the broader religion and family literature: religious involvement often strengthens family bonds, and strong family bonds can in turn deepen religious commitment (Moore et al. 2021; Ellison et al. 2010; Marks et al. 2005). This reciprocity suggests that interventions or pastoral approaches seeking to support Black men and families may be most effective when they address both spiritual formation and relational skills in an integrated manner.

5.8. Limitations

Due to the exceptional nature of the sample being both highly religious and deeply committed to family relationship, emerging patterns, themes, and theoretical implications were almost certainly affected by sampling. The study employed a deliberate purposive, strengths-based, exemplar design, selecting couples who self-identified as highly religious and reported happy, stable marriages, with corroboration from referring clergy or institutional gatekeepers. While this approach allowed for in-depth exploration of positive transformative processes in Black masculinity and fatherhood, it necessarily limits the transferability of the findings. It is not clear if similar patterns or processes would appear in other samples with lower levels of relationship commitment and/or religious commitment, or among couples experiencing high levels of relational conflict. It is also unclear if positive relational outcomes of the new masculine identity would be similar in strength and number if only one part of the ideal was achieved. Likewise, it is unknown if an increase in positive relational outcomes and a decrease in internal and externalizing behaviors would be present if either the qualities of the Godly man or family man ideal were absent from each other.

The sample was limited to Christian participants (multi-denominational but exclusively Christian). While this reflects the religious context of many Black American families and allowed for focused analysis within a shared scriptural tradition, the findings cannot be generalized to Black men and families who practice African traditional religions, Islam, or other faith traditions. Additionally, the study did not include single or unpartnered Black fathers. Future research should examine whether similar mechanisms operate across different religious traditions and among Black fathers in a wider range of relational and family structures.

All data were collected through joint couple interviews conducted in participants’ homes. While this format provided richness about interactive couple processes, it also

introduces the possibility of social desirability bias and may have limited the depth of individual perspectives that could emerge in separate interviews. Because many participants were referred by clergy, some may have felt pressure to present their marriages and faith in a positive light. Religiosity was assessed through self-report and clergy corroboration rather than standardized quantitative scales. Although appropriate for the qualitative sampling strategy, this means that “high religiosity” was defined within the context of this specific sample.

The primary analysis was fully inductive. Ryff’s model of eudaimonic well-being was applied only after themes had emerged from the data, as a post hoc interpretive lens rather than an a priori coding framework. While this preserved the integrity of the grounded-theory process, the connections drawn to specific Ryff dimensions in the Discussion are interpretive. Different analysts might emphasize different dimensions or identify additional frameworks.

Some participants used the term “street-life mentality” to describe former worldviews and behavioral patterns they sought to leave behind. Although we have presented this as participants’ own retrospective language and have emphasized their agency and movement toward relational and spiritual maturity, we acknowledge that such terminology carries the risk of inadvertently evoking deficit narratives if taken out of context. We have attempted to mitigate this by consistently framing the term within participants’ accounts of transformation and growth.

Despite the potential limitations noted above, this study does shed light on new ways of viewing the masculinity success frame for Black males. This study also provided unique qualitative insights into the psychological processes and mechanisms employed by religious believers in the context of their lived experiences. Quantitative research plays a significant role in uncovering relationships, associations, and correlations between phenomena—the “whats” of human interaction and experience. Whereas qualitative research tends to seek to understand the purposes and meaning behind the processes and mechanisms—the “whys” and “hows” of human relationships (Daly 2007). Such a qualitative approach to this topic may continue to provide additional understandings of the trends, patterns, and processes Black males utilize in conceptualizing and articulating their own perceived masculinity.

5.9. Recommendations for Future Research and Study

Further, it would be recommended that racial minority families are studied in the context of religiosity and the potential effect religious beliefs and practices may have on family relationships and interpersonal dynamics. Studying minority families from a religious context is important for at least three reasons. First, as Miller and Thoresen (2003) observed, there is something to be learned from studying the “substantial minority” of Americans who say that religion is “the single most important influence” in their lives (p. 5).

Second, as William James, heralded as the father of empirical psychology and the father of American psychology, noted:

We learn most about a thing when we view it under a microscope, as it were, or in its most exaggerated form. This is true of religious phenomena as of any other kind of fact. The only cases likely to be profitable enough to repay our attention will therefore be cases where the religious spirit is unmistakable. . . . [Because] its fainter manifestations we may tranquilly pass by. (James 1902, p. 48)

Third and finally, in the spirit of Damon and Colby’s (2013) “Why a True Account of Human Development Requires Exemplar Research,” we suggest that future quantitative and qualitative research is needed to validate and discern unique influences, processes, and directionality of the influence of religion on masculinity and fatherhood. We likewise make a call for further research and exploration of other possible mechanisms and processes that

may be involved in defining a Godly man and a family man, particularly among highly religious minority populations, where the impact of such a man may be distinctly felt and needed. Comparative studies that include less religious families, couples experiencing relational strain, single Black fathers, and participants from a wider range of religious traditions would help clarify the conditions under which religion and spirituality most effectively support eudaimonic well-being and relational flourishing.

6. Conclusions

This study suggests that religiosity offers Black men a spiritually grounded alternative framework for masculinity—one centered on moral integrity, relational commitment, and family leadership (Wilcox and Wolfinger 2008). By fostering personal transformation through personal crises and religious community involvement, responsiveness to divine encounter, engagement with scripture, and embracing positive religious roles and responsibilities, faith practices enhance eudaimonic well-being across its six core dimensions (Ryff 2014). These insights contribute to the intersection of religion, spirituality, positive psychology, and family science by demonstrating how religiosity can actively cultivate purpose, growth, autonomy, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and positive relations among Black men (Mahoney et al. 2003; Park et al. 2017).

Practically, the results point to faith communities as valuable resources for strengths-based interventions that counter deficit narratives and promote resilient Black fatherhood. Theoretically, they fill a conspicuous gap in Black Masculinity studies by applying Ryff's eudaimonic model to lived religious experience. Future research should examine these dynamics in more diverse samples, test directionality with mixed methods, and explore whether similar processes operate among men of other racial/ethnic backgrounds or lower levels of religiosity.

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Note

- ¹ Throughout this text, the authors use Black to refer to people of the African Diaspora living in the United States; consequently, “Black” and “African American” are employed interchangeably. While the authors acknowledge possible ethnic distinctions between Black persons and African American individuals, participants preferred “Black” as their racial and ethnic identifier. They most often called themselves “Black” or “Black Americans” because their ancestral ties to Africa are typically many generations removed.

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