

Book Reviews

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Bengston, V., Putney, N.M., & Harris, S. (2013). Families and Faith: How Religion is Passed Down Across Generations. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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Religious affiliation remains an important matter within the life of many families today. It is not uncommon for parents and grandparents to hope that their children and grandchildren will grow up to embrace the religious traditions they cherish. Adherence to shared religious values and practices can play a positive role in strengthening the bonds of solidarity within the family; however, this dimension of intergenerational life also can become a focal point of tension, disappointment, and pain.

Families and Faith is devoted to exploring the factors that influence how, and whether, religious affiliation is passed down from one generation to the next. The publication of this book followed a four-decade-long period during which Vern Bengston, now Professor Emeritus of Gerontology and Sociology at the University of Southern California, worked with a host of collaborators to conduct the Longitudinal Study of Generations (LSOG). This study was the largest study of families ever undertaken with the LSOG following more than 350 multigenerational families composed of over 3,500 individuals. Families and Faith reflects the cumulative fruit of Bengston's long and distinguished career, one that has led to the development of several robust theories about intergenerational relations, as well as the publication of 16 books and roughly 250 research articles.

In this book, the authors draw upon research conducted by their team between 2005 and 2008 as part of the Templeton Foundation funded "Transmission of Religion across Generations"

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project. This project's purpose was to explore patterns of religious experience and the consequences of these patterns among participants in the 35-year LSOG study. More specifically, the research team set out to address three major questions:

- (a) To what extent are parents passing on their faith in today's rapidly changing society?
 - (b) Have the many social and cultural changes of the last half-century eroded the ability of families to transmit religion from one generation to the next?
 - (c) Why are some parents successful at passing on their faith while other parents are not?
- (p. ix)

To answer these questions, the researchers employed the same methodology that had been used in four prior stages of this longitudinal study. They began by gathering survey responses from the members of families that had participated in the LSOG since its inception. Thirty-five years after the first survey was administered, this group now included four generations of family members. The researchers followed this survey by conducting interviews with 156 family members from 25 multigenerational families.

As they prepared to analyze their data, the research team began with the following hypothesis: "In the context of the profound cultural, familial, and religious changes in American society recently, intergenerational differences in values and religion will be more evident than intergenerational continuities" (p. ix). In other words, they expected to find lower levels of familial transmission of religion in 2005 than had been found in 1970. As the authors note, the decline of the family's influence on the religiosity of rising generations has been widely assumed as "common knowledge" in recent years (p. x). However, to their surprise, they actually found that there has been no statistically significant decline in parent-youth similarity in religiosity over this thirty-five-year period. As they expressed: "These results suggest that family influences on

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the religiosity of the younger generation have not weakened to the degree that has been widely reported” (p. 56).

The first three chapters of Families and Faith provide some helpful historical and theoretical background for understanding this study’s focus. The remainder of the book is devoted to an examination of the project’s findings. While there are a number of significant points in these chapters deserving of mention, I will highlight a few particularly noteworthy themes here.

In Chapter 4, the authors introduce one of their most important discoveries, the importance of “parental warmth” as a factor within the process of religious transmission. This chapter portrays a compelling link between the quality of the parent-child relationship and the transmission of faith. As the authors’ summarize: “When children perceive their relationship with parents as close, affirming, and accepting, they are more likely to identify with their parents’ religious practices and beliefs, while relationships marked by coldness, ambivalence, or preoccupation are likely to result in religious differences” (p. 98). This insight constitutes a significant contribution to the broader discussion of parent-child religious transmission.

Chapter 8 provides an intriguing look at “nones”, those who responded to the question about religious affiliation by answering “none” (p. 145). The growing number of “nones” in the United States in recent decades is a phenomenon that has been the focal point of much attention, anxiety, and analysis. This chapter provides a careful examination of the various types of individuals who fit into this category and the experiences by which they have been shaped. The authors’ longitudinal analysis enables them to correct some of the most widely-held assumptions about those “nones” who could best be described as nonreligious. This chapter is one of the book’s most distinctive and important contributions.

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Several other chapters also cover important subjects worth noting briefly. Chapter 5 is devoted to investigating the influence of grandparents upon the religious commitment of their grandchildren, a topic that has been largely neglected in the past. In Chapter 6, the authors provide an intriguing examination of the impact of interfaith marriage and divorce on intergenerational religious transmission, while Chapter 7 explores those cases in which the “nontransmission” of religiosity has occurred, as well as the characteristics of the “rebels, zealots, and prodigals” who have chosen to part ways with their parents’ traditions. Each of these chapters presents significant insights rooted in careful research.

The strength of this volume might also be its greatest limitation. The authors delve deeply into various facets of the transmission of religion within the context of the multigenerational family. However, while religious institutions received indirect attention at various points (most notably Chapters Seven and Nine), the role that they play in the process of religious socialization received minimal attention. In one respect, this study’s focus upon family provides a helpful corrective to the numerous past studies that have tended to treat the intergenerational perpetuation of religiosity rather exclusively as an institutional matter for communities of faith, to the neglect of the significant role that families play.

At the same time, other studies have provided compelling evidence that young people sometimes disassociate from the faith of their parents, at least in part, because of disappointments they have experienced with religious institutions. This was shown to be true in studies conducted during the early 1970s, when Bengston first began this project. More recent studies suggest that this continues to be true today. While holding Families and Faith in high regard, I wish that the methodology employed could have more adequately accounted for, or at least more fully acknowledged, the complex blend of familial and institutional factors that can

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contribute to the attitudes that young people develop toward the religious traditions in which they have been raised.

A second limitation has been well documented in previous critiques of Bengston's work. Over time, questions have been raised regarding the fact that the families originally selected for inclusion in this study were drawn exclusively from Southern California. The technology available when this longitudinal study began made it impractical to engage such a large population of participants without their being concentrated in one geographical region. Because of this limiting factor, some reviewers of the LSOG have questioned whether the experience of families from specific ethnicities and religious communities in the Los Angeles region can be seen to reflect those of families from other backgrounds and contexts. The authors are quite forthcoming in acknowledging this criticism. However, in the Appendix section devoted to explicating their methodology (pp. 207-221), they also present a strong case for the generalizability of their findings. In reality, after four decades, the multigenerational families included in the LSOG have come to be characterized by considerable religious and geographical diversity.

This being said, a number of religious groups are notably absent from Families and Faith. While mainline Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jews, Evangelicals, and Mormons are well represented among the participants in this study (together with Atheists, Agnostics, and the Nonreligious), other faiths are not included. This likely reflects the composition of the religious landscape within which the LSOG was first undertaken several decades ago. However, it does leave open the question of the extent to which the findings outlined in this book could be seen as applicable to other faith groups beyond those included this study.

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The significance of Families and Faith as the culmination of an extraordinary, multi-decade research program cannot be overstated. Because of this, and because of the important insights presented within its pages, this book should be seen as a significant contribution to the field of the Sociology of Religion. It provides an interesting and richly informative account of the place of religion within family life today. While there is much in this book that will be of particular interest to scholarly readers, its readable tone, abundance of charts and graphs, and wealth of narrative descriptions drawn from interview participants heighten its accessibility for other audiences. Anyone interested in the relationship between family life and religious affiliation, or more broadly in the intergenerational transmission of religious traditions, is likely to find considerable value in reading Families and Faith.