

## BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

**Manning, Christel J.** *Losing Our Religion: How Unaffiliated Parents are Raising Their Children*. New York University Press, 2015. 244 pp., \$37.14 paperback (9781479883202)

A bit more than a century ago, Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy wrote: “Without the support from religion ... no father, using only his own resources, would be able to bring up a child.” While this stance may initially seem dated (particularly in the West), research conducted by Christel Manning demonstrates the doubts and difficulties many unaffiliated Americans face when a child appears in their life: what is the best way to “deal with the question of religion in the upbringing of children?” (3). Becoming a parent is a liminal stage when “many individuals re-evaluate their worldview” (35) and decide which knowledge and beliefs to transmit to their children.

*Losing Our Religion: How Unaffiliated Parents are Raising Their Children* studies a unique subset of the US “None” population. The category “None” refers to those who answer “none” when asked about their religious affiliation. Manning focuses her study on those “unaffiliated parents who are most interested in the question of religious upbringing” (4). Drawing on the 2014 US Religious Landscape Study conducted by Pew Research Center, Manning points out that nowadays one-fifth of Americans classify themselves as Nones, “up from only 7 percent twenty years ago” (2). Additionally, Nones comprise “one-third of adults under thirty” (2) who are already parents or who can have children in the near future. Further, Manning notes that many of those who consider themselves to be religious and are counted so by surveys are, in fact, nominal believers (neither seriously committed to religion nor engaged in religious community’s life); therefore, she argues that they should be classified under the category “Nones”. As a result, Manning infers, “current surveys which count only the unaffiliated as Nones may be severely undercounting None growth” (183).

This book contributes to current academic debates over “no religion” categorization which, according to Manning, defines what people lack, but ignores the “variety of beliefs and practices that such individuals do have” (6). Manning’s reconceptualization of “None” gives insight into whether and why parents “want religion in their child’s life” (3) and if so, in which form. She divides religious Nones into four groups:

Unchurched Believers, Spiritual Seekers, Philosophical Secularists, and Indifferents. The last category was coined by Manning. Emphasizing the significance of this term, she states that the true Nones are only under the category “Indifferent” (183). In contrast to the worldviews of other Nones, this category distinguishes “those individuals who are neither religious nor secular” (183) – religious questions “are not relevant to their lives” (183).

Nevertheless, despite the differences, all Nones are united by one common feature: their “deep commitment to personal worldview choice” (184). A discussion about religious education of their children is framed using a *choice narrative*, which has already become “the lingua franca of America” in the words of Sheena Iyengar (144). However, analyzing various sociological and psychological studies, Manning discusses the “paradox of choice”. She argues that “choice can be illusory” (185). Several parents she interviewed admitted that, despite their wish to encourage their child to make his or her own religious choice, “it is near impossible not to impose your own worldview on your children” (141); children “don’t have a mind of their own at that point” (141) and simply follow their parents. Therefore, one respondent claims that “to just do nothing” (184) may actually restrict a child’s religious choice, because no options are represented (141). Thus, a wish to provide a child with guidance that he or she can later choose to follow or not explains why some parents decide to return or affiliate to religious tradition. Also, there are some parents who “follow the child’s lead into religion” (142). But, Manning warns, this alternative can become a tough challenge and a test to the choice narrative when a child chooses a path drastically different from a parent’s.

Overall, a study considering which place unaffiliated parents give to religion in child rearing leads Manning to interdisciplinary research on secularization, individualism, consumerism, spirituality, life cycle theory, and the narrative of “choice”, “time”, and “space” from the perspectives of sociology, psychology, and religious studies. Manning bases her research on existing survey data, and also employs grounded theory methodology, drawing on interviews and observations of respondents’ activities and settings. In addition, the author’s inclusion of personal reflections from her own childhood enriches the book.

Manning’s project has some limitations. Most of the respondents are white and have “Catholic, mainline Protestant, conservative Protestant, Jewish, Mormon, Unitarian, [or] Bahai” backgrounds (198). No parents with Muslim backgrounds were considered in spite of the sizeable number within the US population. As a result, the presentation of unaffiliated parents is incomplete. Manning’s research is based on “forty-eight

formal interviews, plus many additional informal conversations” (198) across the US, and opens up new questions for further larger studies of unaffiliated American parents. For instance, she is convinced that with the growth of Nones there is a need to examine secularist and atheist families’ impact on children’s identities (189). Since Americans still prefer not to classify themselves as atheists in surveys due to the associated negative stigma, there is an “absence of atheist control groups” (183) in contemporary studies. This gap could be addressed by further qualitative research.

Manning admits that existing literature cannot definitely answer the question of whether there are more positive or negative outcomes associated with raising children with religion. She notices that *all* respondents framed their positions on religious upbringing as a way to help their children make their own spiritual choices. The author favors the narrative of choice, which allows her to select that worldview that “best expresses [her] own personal identity or most effectively works to accomplish [her] goals” (153). And she encourages her child to do the same. Manning also acknowledges that a diversity of choices overwhelms and entails stress; therefore, if parents restrict their children’s choices, she argues, “this is probably a good thing” (161). She concludes with questions about how choices influence children’s identities and overall wellbeing, paving the way for further research.

Overall, *Losing Our Religion: How Unaffiliated Parents are Raising Their Children* makes important contributions to the scholarly literature on religious affiliation, child rearing, and secularization in modern American society. It may also be of interest to those parents who intend to know how their counterparts cope with the question of children’s spiritual upbringing and what sociologists and psychologists’ standpoints on child rearing are.

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