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Introduction

HOW DO RELIGIOUS PARENTS in the United States approach the task of passing on their religious faith and practice to their children? And what can that tell us about what "culture" is and how it works? This book answers these two questions, one substantive and one theoretical. Substantively, we learn how American religious parents tackle the challenge of intergenerational religious transmission to children. Theoretically, we learn what an inquiry into that substantive concern teaches us about the nature and operation of culture more generally.

We actually know very little about intergenerational religious transmission *from the perspective of parents*. A growing body of research looks at this issue from the side of children.[1] And an established body of literature statistically analyzes the various factors that influence religious retention and switching.[2] Numerous works have also explored American parenting and family life from a variety of helpful perspectives.[3] Social scientists

1. Including Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Lisa Pearce and Melinda Denton, *A Faith of Their Own* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Christian Smith with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Marjorie Gunnoe and K. Moore, "Predictors of Religiosity among Youth Aged 17–22," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41 (2002): 613–22.

2. For example, Richard Petts, "Trajectories of Religious Participation from Adolescence to Young Adulthood," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48 (2009): 552–71; Vern Bengtson, C. Copen, N. Putney, and M. Silverstein, "A Longitudinal Study of Intergenerational Transmission of Religion," *International Sociology* 24 (2009): 325–45; Christian Smith and David Sikkink, "Social Predictors of Retention in and Switching from the Religious Faith of Family of Origin," *Review of Religious Research* 45, no. 2 (2003): 188–206.

3. See, for instance, Rebecca Jo Plant, *Mom: The Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Jack Westman, ed., *Parenthood in America: Undervalued, Underpaid, Under Siege* (Madison: University of

have also, of course, researched the socialization of children well (although usually paying scant attention to religious transmission).[4] Despite all this work, however, almost no research has explored in depth how religious parents approach the job of socializing their children into their religious identities, practices, and beliefs.[5] That is strange, because we know that parents are the most important factor shaping the religious outcomes of American youth. Yet we know almost nothing about how they approach the task of passing on their faith and practice to their children. This book helps remedy that oversight.

This book is also for readers interested in sociological and anthropological[6] theories of culture, even if they are not especially interested in religion. Our substantive analysis about religious transmission serves as the springboard for advancing a general theoretical argument about culture, one that contests theories dominating in recent decades. So one may have little interest in the study of religion and still find our theoretical analysis and arguments significant and perhaps challenging.

Wisconsin Press, 2001); Paula Fass, *The End of American Childhood: A History of Parenting from Life on the Frontier to the Managed Child* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016). For a comparative study set in the context of the larger animal world, see Susan Allport, *A Natural History of Parenting* (New York: Harmony Books, 1997); Peter Stearns, *Anxious Parents: A History of Modern Childrearing in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Jennifer Senior, *All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenting* (New York: Harper Collins, 2014); Elinor Ochs and Tamara Kremer-Sadlik, eds., *Fast-Forward Family: Home, Work, and Relationships in Middle-Class America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World* (New York: Basic Books, 1979); Jan Dizard and Howard Gadlin, *The Minimal Family* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990); Kathryn Lofton, "Religion and the Authority in American Parenting," *Journal for the American Academy of Religion* 84, no. 3 (2016): 806–41.

4. For example, religion as a topic merits only one sentence in Joan Grusec and Paul Hastings's 720-page *Handbook of Socialization: Theory and Research* (New York: Guilford Press, 2007). Ute Schönpflug's *Cultural Transmission: Psychological, Developmental, Social, and Methodological Aspects* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) includes no references to religion at all.

5. To be sure, a nontrivial body of literature examines the influence of family contexts of religious transmission but little of it focuses specifically on the actual perspectives and approaches of parents (one partial exception being Vern Bengtson, *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down across Generations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

6. To be clear, we are not anthropologists or expert in the latest debates in anthropological theories of culture, so we are surer about our contribution to cultural sociology. Nevertheless, the theory we employ is drawn from cognitive anthropology, so if nothing else, we hope to lend our endorsement of the merits and value of that school of thought for the larger anthropological enterprise.

Our Research

Our substantive findings and theoretical argument in this book are based on a national sociological study of American religious[7] and nonreligious parents that we and colleagues conducted in 2014 and 2015.[8] We conducted 215 personal, in-depth interviews with parents who belong to churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples who by affiliation are white conservative Protestant, mainline Protestant, black Protestant, white Catholic, Latino Catholic, Conservative Jews, Mormon, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist.[9] To compare with this religious sample, we also interviewed an additional sample of twenty nonreligious parents. The parents we studied lived in the Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, Albuquerque, Washington, DC, and New York City areas; and in various parts of Indiana, New Jersey, Florida, Wisconsin, Rhode Island, and Minnesota. We sometimes conducted interviews in locations that in some way typify their religious group—for example, we conducted most of our Latino Catholic interviews with parents in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Brooklyn, New York, rather than, say, Minnesota.

We selected parents to interview using a "stratified quota" sampling method. This means that we interviewed a set number of parents (the quota) from combinations of categories (the "strata" of types) of religious

7. We define religion as "a complex of culturally prescribed practices, based on premises about the existence and nature of superhuman powers, whether personal or impersonal, which seek to help practitioners gain access to and communicate or align themselves with these powers, in hopes of avoiding misfortune, obtaining blessings, and receiving deliverance from crises" (Christian Smith, *Religion: What It Is, How It Works, and Why It Matters* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017). This definition, which focuses on religious practices more than beliefs, compels us to count as religious a few parents who were connected to religious congregations but who told us in their interviews that they were agnostics or atheists, at least when it comes to a certain view of God.

8. See the appendix for methodological details. Also see Heather Price and Christian Smith, "Process and Reliability for Cultural Model Analysis Using Semi-Structured Interviews," American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Montreal, August 2017.

9. Ten of the interviewed parents sampled through religious congregations turned out to be religiously affiliated and more or less practicing but not personally religious believers—for example, they reported not believing in God but nonetheless being religiously involved for the sake of their spouses or children. Three of these were Jewish, two Buddhist, two white Catholic, and one each mainline Protestant, Hindu, and Hispanic Catholic. For purposes of this study, we count these ten parents as religious, since they affiliate and usually at least minimally practice religiously, even if they do not completely believe the doctrines of their religious traditions (which many even more religious American parents do not). See how we define religion in footnote no. 7 and its relevance for this methodological decision.

tradition, social class, race and ethnicity, family structure, and parental religious commitment. We intentionally interviewed parents in middle- and upper-middle-class households and in poorer and working-class households. We interviewed parents in two-parent households and parents who are divorced, remarried in "blended" families, and never married. We interviewed parents who are white, black, Hispanic, Asian, and of some other race or ethnicity. Most of the parents we interviewed were heterosexual, but some were in same-sex parenting households.[10] Many of the children of the parents we interviewed are biological, but some are stepchildren and some are adopted.

Our interview sample is not strictly representative of the populations of religious parents it includes. In-depth research interviews rarely are. Nor does our study include every possible religious tradition. We only studied Conservative Jews, for instance, not Reform, Orthodox, or other kinds of American Jews. Our interviews do, however, provide a large and varied enough sample of different kinds of American parents to be able to identify major themes and differences among these groups of parents in our sampled religious traditions. Our central purpose was to identify the "cultural models" that inform the ways that many kinds of American religious parents approach the challenge of handing on faith and practice to their children. We also wanted to identify and explain apparent dissimilarities between different types of parents. The substantive questions animating this book have received so little study by scholars that we found it enough to undertake these basic explorations. Our interview sample enables us to do that well—although future research with larger samples and including other religious groups can build on and extend our findings here.[11]

The heart of our argument in this book rests on our analysis of the 235 personal interviews we conducted, primarily of the 215 self-identified

10. Our sample was not large enough to draw out reliable comparisons, but our same-sex household parents did not differ at all from heterosexual parents in their views about passing on religion to their children.

11. A second book also produced by this same research project, however, does include nationally representative data and perspective (Christian Smith and Amy Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith: How Parents Pass Their Religion on to the Next Generation* [2020]). In addition to analyzing the in-depth interviews, that book also statistically analyzes four existing, nationally representative survey datasets of American parents and congregations that included questions about the transmission of faith and practice to children: the National Study of Youth and Religion survey (2002–13), the Culture of American Families survey (2012), the Faith and Families in America survey (2005), and the US Congregational Life Survey (2008–9). The results of those statistical analyses provide a big-picture, contextual framework that is nationally representative, within which we can set and understand the qualitative findings from our personal interviews in this book.

religious parents. Our purpose is to identify the major themes, differences, and complexities concerning faith transmission to children among American religious parents. Our findings from the interviews, again, do not purport to represent all types of religious parents in proportion to their numbers in the population. Still, we believe they offer great insight. We are confident that our interview-sampling methodology has exposed us to major swaths of different kinds of American religious parents, so that our findings do identify the major cultural models of religious parenting in the United States. Our story is certainly not complete and our findings do not represent in exact proportion the full population of American religious parents. But we are assured that the themes we present in the following chapters are real and roughly proportionate to their reality in American life.

Our interview sample, again, represents *religious* parents, those who have some membership connection to a church, synagogue, temple, or mosque.[12] Our focus is American parents who are religiously connected and invested enough to have a tie to a religious congregation, not the full range of all American parents. We intentionally chose to investigate the religiously "higher end" of American parents because we think they will provide greater insight to better answer the research questions we are asking. Readers must keep in mind, then, that we are not discussing American parents of all levels of religious commitment—even if our sample includes a lot of variation of religious commitment—but relatively more highly religious American parents.

The Overriding Importance of Parents

The single, most powerful causal influence on the religious lives of Americans teenagers and young adults is the religious lives of their parents. Not their peers, not the media, not their youth group leaders or clergy, not their religious school teachers. Myriad studies show that, beyond a doubt, the parents of Americans play *the* leading role in shaping the character of their religious and spiritual lives, even well after they leave home and

12. The nonreligious parents we interviewed were a convenience sample, intended to provide some comparative leverage for our religious sample, not the basis of a study of nonreligious parents in its own right. In fact, we found that the nonreligious parents we interviewed reflected the same underlying cultural models about life, children, and parenting as the religious parents—their basic assumptions, perspectives, and priorities sounded nearly identical—the only difference being that the religious parents naturally spoke more personally about the value and importance of religion.

often for the rest of their lives.[13] Furthermore, this parental influence has not declined in effectiveness since the 1970s.[14] Some American parents seem to think that they lose most of their influence over their children around the early teen years; more than a few American teenagers act as if their parents no longer matter much in their lives. But in most cases those are cultural myths belied by the sociological facts.

The influence of parents on children while they still live at home—including their influence on their religious identities, beliefs, and practices—is paramount, lasting for years, decades, often lifetimes. The best general predictor of what any American is like religiously, after comparing all of the other possible variables and factors, is what their parents were like religiously when they were raising their children. Parents do not of course control or determine the religious lives of their children, and

13. Smith with Denton, *Soul Searching*; Christian Smith with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Bengtson, *Families and Faith*; S. Myers, "An Interactive Model of Religious Inheritance: The Importance of Family Context," *American Sociological Review* 61 (1996): 858–66; Lisa Pearce and Arland Thornton, "Religious Identity and Family Ideologies in the Transition to Adulthood," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 69 (2007): 1227–43; Richard Petts, "Trajectories of Religious Participation from Adolescence to Young Adulthood," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48 (2009): 552–71; Marjorie Gunnoe and K. Moore, "Predictors of Religiosity among Youth Aged 17–22," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41 (2002): 613–22; Christopher Bader and S. Desmond, "Do as I Say and as I Do: The Effects of Consistent Parental Beliefs and Behaviors upon Religious Transmission," *Sociology of Religion* 67 (2006): 313–29; Darren Sherkat, "Religious Socialization," in *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Michele Dillon (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 151–63; J. Kim, Michael McCullough, and D. Chicchetti, "Parents' and Children's Religiosity and Child Behavioral Adjustment among Maltreated and Non-maltreated Children," *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 18 (2009): 594–605; Vern Bengtson, C. Copen, N. Putney, and M. Silverstein, "A Longitudinal Study of Intergenerational Transmission of Religion," *International Sociology* 24 (2009): 325–45; Sarah Spilman, Tricia Neppl, Brent Donnellan, Thomas Schofield, and Rand Conger, "Incorporating Religiosity into a Developmental Model of Positive Family Functioning across Generations," *Developmental Psychology* 49 (2013): 762–74; Pamela King, J. Furrow, and N. Roth, "The Influence of Families and Peers on Adolescent Religiousness," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 21 (2002): 109–20; W. Bao, L. Whitbeck, D. Hoyt, and Rand Conger, "Perceived Parental Acceptance as a Moderator of Religious Transmission among Adolescent Boys and Girls," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 61 (1999): 362–74; R. Day, H. Jones-Sanpei, J. Smith Price, D. Orthner, E. Hair, K. Moore, and K. Kaye, "Family Processes and Adolescent Religiosity and Religious Practice," *Marriage and Family Review* 45 (2009): 289–309; K. Hyde, *Religion in Childhood and Adolescence* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1990); E. Maccoby, "The Role of Parents in the Socialization of Children," *Developmental Psychology* 28 (1992): 1006–17; John Wilson and Darren Sherkat, "Returning to the Fold," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33 (1994): 148–61.

14. Bengtson, *Families and Faith*, 54–67, 185–86.

many households produce children whose religious lives vary wildly. But a large body of accumulated research consistently shows that, when viewing Americans as a whole, the influence of parents on religiousness trumps every other influence, however much parents and children may assume otherwise.

That profound influence of parents provides the premise for the importance of this book, which speaks to many audiences. Sociologists are interested in understanding processes of social reproduction, how social practices and beliefs are carried on with continuity from one generation to the next. That involves learning about the role of families and other institutions in the process of socialization.[15] Many parents are also invested in how their children turn out religiously, as are many grandparents, religious leaders, clergy, youth pastors, family friends, teachers, and mentors.[16] Since parents are so important in shaping the religious outcomes of their children, their approach to the matter deserves to be understood and explained well.

In fact, however, social scientists have conducted surprisingly little reliable empirical research on the culture of parenting in the intergenerational transmission of religious faith and practice. Sociology contains a massive literature on marriage and family, some of which engages questions of religion, since in America family and religion are so closely tied together.[17] The sociology of religion has also enjoyed a recent burgeoning of studies on the religious lives of teenagers and emerging adults. Sociologists of religion have also long studied religious conversion from one faith (or lack thereof) to another. Some sociologists and political scientists also research institutions involved in socialization generally, including political socialization, such as families, schools, peer groups, and the media. But few have studied the perspectives and approaches of parents themselves

15. For a landmark and exemplary work focused on social inequality, see Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

16. Some previous studies show that grandparents play a significant role in the religious outcomes of their grandchildren (e.g., Valerie King and Glen Elder, "Are Religious Grandparents More Involved Grandparents?" *Journal of Gerontology* 54 [1999]: S317–S328; Holly Allen and Heidi Oschwald, "The Spiritual Influence of Grandparents," *Christian Education Journal* 5, no. 2 [2018]: 346–62). Our focus in this study and the nature of our data do not, however, lend themselves to an investigation of the role of grandparents in this process.

17. For example, Penny Edgell, *Religion and Family in a Changing Society* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Wesley Burr, Loren Marks, and Randal Day, *Sacred Matters: Religion and Spirituality in Families* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

when it comes to the religious socialization of their children—especially on a national level that includes a broad array of religious traditions and other demographic variables.[18] This book (and a second book produced by this same research project)[19] redresses that deficiency.

Rethinking Culture

This book is not only an empirical analysis of how religious parents in the United States approach passing on faith to their children. We also advance a theoretical argument about the nature and workings of culture. Our argument calls into question a broad set of theories of culture that have dominated cultural sociology and anthropology since the 1980s. We do not critique one specific school or theory of culture. Rather, we address an assemblage of views that nonetheless share strong family resemblances marked by the influence of common reactions in the 1970s and '80s against the previously dominant view of culture.

For present purposes, suffice it to say that we went into our interviews with religious American parents from many backgrounds expecting to encounter diversity, but instead we heard something approaching consensus. We anticipated parental conversations about life, religion, and children to display internal incoherence, but instead discovered an underlying coherence and reasonable intelligibility. We sampled our interview respondents intentionally to examine differences between religious traditions, race and ethnicity, social class, gender, household type, and rural-urban background, but we encountered instead assumptions, hopes, and strategies that are widely shared across those differences. Rather than rummaging their "tool kits" of culturally acceptable explanations to justify their practices, our interview respondents expressed presuppositions, convictions, and expectations that were clearly internalized and dear to their hearts. After completing our interviews, we spent two years meticulously coding and analyzing our data just as the standard "variables sociology" mentality would advise, but in the end we found not disparate outcomes correlated with differing categories, but a general approach shared across the categories, almost as if it had been systematically indoctrinated.

18. See, for example, the observations of S. Hardy, J. White, Z. Zhang, and J. Ruchty, "Parenting and Socialization of Religiousness and Spirituality," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 3 (2011): 217–30; Kim, McCullough, and Chicchetti, "Parents' and Children's Religiosity"; P. Heaven, J. Ciarrochi, and P. Leeson, "Parental Styles and Religious Values among Teenagers," *Journal of Genetic Psychology* 171 (2010): 93–99.

19. Smith and Adamczyk, *Handing Down the Faith*.

This book's theoretical contribution grounded in our empirical case, therefore, is to show that culture can be *coherent*, *consensual*, *reasonable*, *internalized*, and *teleological* in its orientation to *guiding* life practices. This is not an argument for a return to antiquated theories of culture. Instead, we wish to move forward into a theoretical space that corrects numerous over-reactions and mistakes of the dominant approach of recent decades. Toward that end, this book reconstructs the "cultural models" that inform how American religious parents approach the transmission of religious faith and practice to their children, through a careful analysis of their extended talking about that and related subjects. Chapter 5 then elaborates our theoretical view on the relationship between such discourse, culture, and cultural models. But first, the next four chapters demonstrate our central empirical case for the reality, coherence, agreement about, and substantive reasonability of cultural models.

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