

FAMILIES AND FAITH

How Religion is Passed Down Across Generations

By Vern L. Bengtson

With Norella M. Putney and Susan Harris

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It seems American society is marching towards atheism. Smart phones replace prayer books, and football often eats up a weekend. Religious leaders are made anxious by the numbers leaving their faith, and familial relations often fall into disrepair over different religious beliefs. Teaching religion to children is a critical tenant in all religions; yet, religious leaders often feel that the tenant has become harder to fill, struggling against massive changes in society.

These common hypotheses are unfounded, as leading gerontologist and sociologist Vern L. Bengtson explores in **FAMILIES AND FAITH: How Religion is Passed Down Across Generations**. Since the 1960s, Bengtson and co-authors Norella M. Putney and Susan Harris have studied the transmission of religion in four-generation families. To find out how religion is, or is not, passed down, they have followed more than 350 families composed of more than 3500 individuals through war and social upheaval, economic depression and technological revolution.

Some of their astonishing findings include:

- Older generations view god as tangible and evident in nature, while younger generations internalize and de-objectify god.
- Mormons and Jews have higher rates of transmission (approx. 85% transmission rate).
- 63% of parents not affiliated with religion had children who were also non-affiliated.
- We assume cultural and historical forces are eroding family influence, but 60% of baby boomer parents and their children share the same religious affiliation (or non-religion).
- Familial closeness determines transmission. Depending on the religion, children are 10-20% more likely to stay in religion if they are close to their parents.
- A strong paternal bond is most important in transmitting religion, except in Judaism, where a strong maternal bond plays a greater role in transmission.
- Cold, distant and authoritarian parenting will drastically hinder efforts to pass down religion.
- Children who leave the religious fold will likely come back to the religion as they age.

FAMILIES AND FAITH is a critical study to understand religious transmission, intergenerational relationships and socializing. Bengtson's analysis, derived from 40 years of study, points the way for the future of religion in American society.

Vern L. Bengtson is the AARP/University Professor of Gerontology and Sociology Emeritus and Research Professor of Social Work at the University of Southern California. He has published sixteen books and over 220 articles. He was elected President of the Gerontological Society of America and has twice been granted a MERIT award from the National Institute on Aging for his 35-year Longitudinal Study of Generations, on which this book is based.

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