

Vern L. Bengtson, with Norella M. Putney and Susan Harris (2015). *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down across Generations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 267 pp. ISBN 978 0199 9486 59 (hardcover)

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Families stand strong, and so does religion and family transmission of values that include religious convictions and practices. At least in the United States. This is the well-underpinned message in the book *Families and Faith* – one of many publications over the years from the Longitudinal Study of Generations (LSOG) headed by Vern Bengtson. Since the project started in 1970, the authors have collected information on Southern Californian families about their family relations and the transfer of values over generations. This book is a well-written report on the lives of contemporary families in various constellations of religious belief, scepticism or denial.

The authors are aware that it is common to see contemporary life as secular, individualistic and primarily materialistic. Change happens fast, the youth are rebellious and family breakdown is ever present.

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All these things challenge traditional religions and institutionalised ways of socialising children, such as Sunday school.

As we read it, the book is primarily about contemporary families, not just about religion. One may see it as a response to Tamara Hareven's call (1991) for studies on families from a wider context, including studies on family values. Bengtson and colleagues use both statistical evidence and in-depth interviews with a carefully selected subsample of their interviewees to analyse how families manage to instil their values in their children. The family, in all its complexity, is considered as a central socialising agent in the book. The authors convincingly show that religiosity (and lack of it) is transferred surprisingly well by today's families. This is especially the case in "warm" families where children have the freedom to choose and parents don't "shove religion down the throat," in one participant's words.

The authors' use of lengthy but interesting family vignettes heightens the understanding of the different roads that value transmission may take, regardless if children become zealots, rebels or prodigals. Even when children leave a religious fold, they may nevertheless "inherit" humanistic values. National surveys support the authors' results, but their longitudinal approach shows shifts between generations not available to cross-sectional data. One may compare with studies on social mobility, which typically show both change and continuity of positions.

Concepts in social psychology such as role models and socialisation are efficiently used throughout the book as theoretical building blocks. Yet, we miss Durkheim's approach and his insight that too much or too little social control may destroy human interaction and even life itself (in *Suicide*). Durkheim also points out parallels between social life and religion. A very demanding religion is rarely found in a permissive society, but may for precisely this reason be attractive to some. For example, in Lutheran and permissive Sweden, conversion to Catholicism is growing.

Bengtson and colleagues describe spirituality as a new and expanding kind of semi-religiosity, visible among Baby boomers and later cohorts who are spiritual but increasingly unaffiliated with established religions. We think the authors are onto something here, but we miss a specification

of what they mean by spirituality. Statements made by some strongly religious interviewees in the book suggest that they also have trouble understanding the concept.

Further, what is missing from the book is the influence of history on religiosity. History may influence religiosity just as much as the family. We intend to illustrate this with two examples from our own studies. In Sweden, the state and church were traditionally partners, not only in controlling morals but in monitoring, recording, taxing and conscripting people. In fact, the first Swedes that left for America in 1846 did so for religious reasons. In recent history, many other civic organizations tie people together in Sweden, thereby creating another role for religion. In the 1930s, a Swedish author (Ludvig Nordström) even stated that belief in the welfare state had taken the place of religion. But after major traumatic events, people still gather in churches rather than municipal auditoriums. Another example of the relationship between history and religiosity can be found in Spain. Spain's image (at least abroad) is one of deep-rooted religiosity, and there is a complex relationship between church and state. Yet surveys show remarkably little traditional religiosity and widespread disbelief in church teachings and dogmas (CIS 2008). As in Sweden, religious beliefs and practices in Spain have declined dramatically (Malmberg et al. 2008). These examples show that historical contexts may have consequences for individual families, regardless of how energetically parents socialise their children. As Hareven (1991) put it, families are actors, but they also act in a context.

To conclude, *Families and Faith* is remarkably easy to read and accessible to laymen. Scientific considerations are mostly stowed away in fine print, into footnotes and in the appendix. Surprisingly, the closing chapter provides advice for parents and religious leaders on how to facilitate transmission of religious values. This is unexpected in a book from an academic publisher. Nevertheless, we enjoy this ethnographic trip into the exotics of American religiosity. We can learn from this book that families do continue to transmit their values, and they probably do so also in European and other contexts as well. Stimulating analyses show that overt religiosity is stronger in the United States, but the basic message of this book is that families are here to stay and, it seems, so is religion.

References

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