

How do parents pass along their faith to children?

Christian Smith and Amy Adamczyk's sociological study offers some clues.

by [Emily Soloff](#) in the [July 28, 2021](#) issue

In Review



Handing Down the Faith

How Parents Pass Their Religion on to the Next Generation

By Christian Smith and Amy Adamczyk

Oxford University Press

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While religious affiliation in America continues to decline, transmission of religion from parents to children perseveres and is an area worth serious study, according to sociologists Christian Smith and Amy Adamczyk. In this book, they take a deep dive into what they say is the “single, most powerful causal influence on the religious lives of American teenagers and young adults”—not peers, not media, not clergy, but rather the religious lives of their parents.

Noting that what motivates and energizes parents has been little studied, Smith and Adamczyk offer an upbeat, eyes-wide-open assessment of what seems to work intergenerationally, based on extensive research and in-depth interviews. The book is not so much a how-to as a look at how American religious parents are handing on their religious practices and beliefs to the next generation. The authors also examine what type of parenting proves most successful in that transmission.

Smith and Adamczyk focus on the question, What do American religious parents actually *assume*, *desire*, and *say* they do to try to pass on religion to their children? Explaining what motivates their research, they write:

We know a lot about the importance of parents in faith transmission and factors that influence its effectiveness. But we know much less about the actual beliefs, feelings, and activities of the parents themselves when it comes to the intergenerational transmission of religious faith and practice.

The authors fill this gap by including direct quotes from parents, enabling readers to compare common activities and apprehensions expressed by parents from various traditions.

Through analysis of broad surveys and in-depth interviews with some 230 carefully selected parents from different religious affiliations and diverse economic circumstances, the authors strive to “contribute significantly to knowledge about parenting, religion, culture and socialization.” Their interest is in parents who view religion as “a normal, valuable, meaningful, and worthy part of life . . . not something deserving of skepticism or indifference” and who embrace their role as the primary agents in their children’s religious formation.

They examine the kind of cultural assumptions parents make and how different kinds of parenting and parental experiences—including religious tradition, social class, family structure, race, ethnicity, immigration status, and personal religious commitment—influence how parents pass religion to their children. “When parents think about religion,” they write, “the primary focus is its practical value, how it helps people, what makes it important in this life.” One chapter also includes the role of grandparents, spouses, and ex-partners in shaping religious parenting. “Religion,” they write, “can provide cohesion and solidarity in family relationships.”

The researchers cast a wide net, interviewing White conservative Protestants, mainline Protestants, White and Latino Catholics, Conservative Jews, Mormons, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists. They sought out parents with strong religious feelings, committed to their faith institutionally, and with firm beliefs that religion is an important asset—even an essential one—to a child’s growth and development. For comparison, they also interviewed some two dozen nonreligious parents.

While the interviews were conducted in 2014 and 2015, the publication arrives just as parents and educators are beginning to emerge from pandemic closures of schools and religious institutions. The book thus offers exhausted parents a glimmer of hope that the ways they talk about their beliefs and model religious behavior do indeed build religious “muscle memory,” even when the reinforcement provided by religious institutions has been severely curtailed by lockdowns and closures.

But this isn’t only a book for parents. It’s also for academics, religious educators, and clergy. Perhaps especially meaningfully for those in the latter categories, *Handing Down the Faith* devotes a chapter to parents’ expectations of religious congregations and professionals as they seek to instill religious faith in children. Transparent in their methodology, the authors provide charts, footnotes, chapter introductions and conclusions, and an appendix that explains the interview data collection method.

In the end, Smith and Adamczyk admit that “no simple factor or formula explains or predicts how or why intergenerational religious transmission operates or succeeds. As with all things humanly social, the processes are complex, contingent, and multileveled.” Their job as sociologists of religion is neither to “judge, make recommendations to, or influence religious worlds, but rather to understand and explain those worlds for all who are interested in them.”

In other words, religious parents are on their own when it comes to figuring out the implications for their own situations. The data and anecdotes in this book may help, though. And—as Smith and Adamczyk’s research makes clear—so will talking to their children about religion, personal belief, and even doubts.