

Transmitting Religion

A Look at Vern L. Bengtson's *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down across Generations*

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Over the past hundred years, social scientists have tended to take one of three approaches with respect to the topic of religion. Approach 1 typically pathologizes and intellectually scorns religious beliefs, practices, and faith communities, although there are now hundreds of empirical studies that link religious involvement with *increased* mental health, relational health, physical health, and longevity.¹ Approach 2 politely ignores, minimizes, or marginalizes religion.² Approach 3 engages in actively studying religion but typically with a cold, arms-length, agnostic-like feel. For nearly thirty years, sociologist Vern Bengtson, the author of *Families and Faith*,³ practiced this third approach.

As Bengtson autobiographically recounts in the book's preface, "I was to become the weak link in [the] chain that had connected generations through faith" (viii). This lived experience brought pain and tension to his family relationships and to his faithful parents. Decades passed, as did his parents. Then, Bengtson reveals to his readers, "On Easter Sunday three years ago, I wandered into a church service. Suddenly I was overwhelmed by the music and beauty, and bowled over by recollections

1. Harold G. Koenig, Dana E. King, and Verna B. Carson, *Handbook of Religion and Health*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

2. Loren D. Marks, "Mental Health, Religious Belief, and 'The Terrifying Question,'" *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 15 no. 2 (2006): 135–41.

3. Vern L. Bengtson, with Norella M. Putney and Susan Harris, *Families and Faith: How Religion Is Passed Down across Generations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

and revelations—utterly ‘surprised by joy,’ as C. S. Lewis described his own later-life religious experience. I came back. So these days I’m in church every Sunday, singing away in the choir” (xi). Bengtson now identifies as a returned prodigal, thereby punching his membership card with a group of social scientists employing Approach 4, which involves researching the data while actively engaging in religious belief, practice, and community. The group taking this approach is very small, due in part to the academy’s deeply rooted skepticism of the devout who research the merits of religion. This uneasiness only complicates matters for those seeking tenure.

From my perspective, Bengtson’s transparency and reflexivity from the outset of the volume were courageous and appreciated. Throughout the work, Bengtson (with his collaborators Norella Putney and Susan Harris) seems to engage in a delicate, artful, and precision-demanding dance between Approach 3 and Approach 4. The careful, measured, systematic work valued in Approach 3 is the *modus operandi* as the reader passes through this landmark, longitudinal study on families and faith spanning more than three decades. The ideals of careful measurement and objectivity permeate the ten chapters that cover a variety of related issues, including interfaith marriage, grandparents, “the distant dad,” and three classifications of children (“rebels,” “zealots,” and “prodigals”). However, the reader occasionally feels warmth from Bengtson’s own rekindled fire of faith that adds a relevance and passion to family-level narratives that are expressed with both numbers and words.

Methods

The featured strength of the book is the authors’ careful and groundbreaking examination of religion across generations—more specifically, across an almost unprecedented three or four generations. To conduct a longitudinal study focused on individuals as a unit of analysis (see Judith Wallerstein’s twenty-five-year study of children of divorce⁴) is an arduous undertaking. To both engineer and execute a three-decade study examining *families across generations* is a comparatively monumental and complex endeavor, nothing less than the work of a lifetime.

I now turn to two pervasive methodological criticisms, offered with regard to previous social science addressing the connection between

4. Judith Wallerstein, Julia Lewis, and Sandra Blakeslee, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study* (New York: Hyperion, 2000).

families and religion. The first, from Gerald Handel,⁵ is the critique that most “family” research is not truly “family” research because it tends to focus exclusively on one relationship (usually the mother-child or marital relationship). Handel further notes that most family research is limited to data from only *one* family member (usually the mother). I have referred to this elsewhere as having only Mom pose for the family portrait.⁶ Handel continues, “No [single] member of any family is a sufficient source of information for that family.”⁷ Annette Mahoney, a leading scholar of religion and family, has noted a similar pattern in social science research on religion—and has also documented a lack of depth in how religion is measured and studied.⁸ Specifically, in a painstakingly detailed decade review of social science addressing religion and families, Mahoney reported that during the first decade of the twenty-first century, seventy-six percent of parenting research studies and seventy-nine percent of marital studies used only one or two items to measure religion variables.⁹ To summarize, most social science on religion and families is woefully narrow in scope: (a) in terms of relying on one participant per family and (b) regarding the lack of depth and detail in which religion is measured or examined.

What Bengtson, Putney, and Harris offer is a study that engages multiple participants from the same families across generations, thereby countering Handel’s criticism of the solitary individual posing for the family portrait. Indeed, not only do Bengtson and colleagues assess *both* parents, they also collect data from a child (or children), as well as data from the grandparents (and sometimes even great-grandparents). As a result, the book ultimately includes a total of more than thirty-five hundred participants. In terms of multigenerational family perspectives and insights, this is perhaps the most expansive study on religion and families to date.

5. G. Handel, “Family Worlds and Qualitative Family Research: Emergence and Prospects of Whole-Family Methodology,” *Marriage and Family Review* 24 no. 3 (1996): 335–48.

6. Loren D. Marks and David C. Dollahite, *Religion and Families* (New York: Routledge/Taylor and Francis, 2017).

7. Handel, “Family Worlds and Qualitative Family Research,” 346.

8. Annette Mahoney, “Religion in the Home 1999 to 2009: A Relational Spirituality Perspective,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72, no. 4 (2010): 805–27.

9. Mahoney, “Religion in the Home,” 806.

In connection with the lack of depth in assessing religion documented by Mahoney (nearly eight in ten studies have used only one or two items to assess religion), a careful read-through of Bengtson and colleagues' work reveals that *several* aspects of religion were taken into account. These aspects include (but are not limited to) religious denomination, patterns of church/synagogue attendance, family rituals, religious beliefs (for example, biblical literalism), "religious intensity," "civic religiosity," and so forth. Further, an array of U.S. religions is represented and addressed, including Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and Mormon families (with sufficient numbers of each for meaningful and statistically significant cross-group comparisons). Bengtson and colleagues also sampled a substantial group of religious "nones" (those who reported their religious affiliation as "none"), thereby adding richness to the overall project. Finally, in addition to rigorous statistical analyses, interview-based qualitative data have been collected and brought to bear. No study is without flaws (for example, this one has little apparent racial diversity), but a balanced view of the overall project reveals a multifaceted gem in a rare class with no more than perhaps a handful of family and religion studies to date.

Key Findings

What were the key findings of Bengtson and colleagues' efforts? In chapter 1, the authors review several post-World War II changes in American society and in American families and posit: "Throughout Western history, during times of rapid social change, two social institutions have often served to buffer individuals . . . the family and religion" (5). They then pose the question, "Does this hold true today?" Additional questions at the outset include whether the influence of American religion is softening. cursory reports include the "softening" growth of the Mormons, the "fastest-growing Christian community in America" in the 1990s, contrasted with the recent "remarkable . . . increase in the numbers of 'nones' . . . who claim no traditional religious affiliation" (7). For Bengtson and colleagues though, the major questions of their research include:

1. To what extent are families able to pass on their religious faith to the next generation in today's rapidly changing society?
2. How has this changed over the past several decades, in the context of remarkable cultural, familial, and religious change in American society?

3. Why are some families able to achieve their goal of transmitting their faith to their children while others are not? (11)

For many readers of *BYU Studies Quarterly*, this last question is one of *the* questions of life, not merely academically but pragmatically. As parents, as lay leaders, as engaged and concerned members of a faith that matters profoundly to us, how do we successfully give, convey, impart, and transmit to our children and the rising generation that which is most precious to us? After briefly but effectively painting some sociocultural contexts, the authors dive right into this latter and central question in chapter 1. We are introduced to the Poole family, “a four-generation family . . . with a mixed pattern of religious transmission across” thirty-five years (13). A four-generation genogram (14) portrays the religious diversity in this family. Methodist roots in the first generation shift into religious “nones” in the second. The third generation yields a religious “none,” a Christian Scientist, a Nondenominational Christian, two Mormons, and an unknown. The fourth generation includes a mixed bag of “nones,” actively involved Mormons, and disaffected Mormons, with no Methodists. In addition to the genogram, the authors offer six pages of narrative detail, including religious tensions within and across generations (for example, references to Mormonism as a “cult” by an uncle not directly involved in the study). Religious and familial complexity are both captured, but in ways that are coherent instead of dizzying. The reader emerges with a feel for the Poole family as real persons and for the pluralistic options they have pursued. We see several cases where religion was not successfully transmitted, as well as instances where it was, thereby commencing the central conversation of the book.

As *Families and Faith* progresses, the pattern the authors develop for educating the reader seems to be as follows: (1) briefly present relevant socio-religious context using past and present data from a variety of sources, (2) pose difficult related questions, and then (3) offer responses based on their own data set, including rich qualitative case studies (occasionally accompanied by genograms) and descriptive statistics (often assisted by tables, bar charts, and pie charts to assist the visual learners among us). Following variations of this pattern, the authors present textured responses to the overarching questions they pose. This heuristic approach tends to be an effective one, and the created cadence is an intellectually satisfying one.

In chapter 2, context is again offered and the tough question is, How did religion and spirituality change across generations (“age cohorts”)

on a national level over the course of the twentieth century? Here, however, instead of using one multigenerational family, the authors present qualitative data from a religiously diverse smattering of participants (Nondenominational Christian, Catholic, Jewish, Lutheran, Episcopalian, Methodist, Mormon, Christian Scientist, Evangelical, Atheist, “None,” and New Age spirituality). The chapter shows off the richly pluralistic nature of the sample and serves as an effective demonstration of the wide array of belief and practice in the United States (not only across but also within faiths). Bengtson, a leading scholar of life course theory (as developed by Glen Elder and Tamara Hareven)¹⁰ also casts a sensitive eye to national cohorts and captures religious continuity and change across seven twentieth-century age cohorts: World War I (1900–1915); Depression Era (1916–31); Silent Generation (1932–45); Older Boomers (1946–54); Younger Boomers (1955–64); Generation X (1965–79); and Millennials (1980–88). Thirty cross-cohort, compare and contrast findings are captured in a single figure (52). One key documented transformation includes a shifting conception of God as “external” to “internal” after the Depression Era—and an increasingly subjective vision of God among Millennials that “God is whatever you want it to be.” Accompanying this increasingly fluid vision of God is an increasingly fluid and unstructured vision of religious practice and “church” that shifted from a “religious practice equals church” vision among the World War I cohort to a “spiritual practice equals NOT in a church” among the Younger Boomers who came of age during the Age of Aquarius.

The question of chapter 3 is captured in the title “Has Family Influence Declined?” More specifically, given the power of contemporary American culture, is parental religious influence nonexistent, weak, moderate, or salient on the whole? Bengtson, Putney, and Harris attack this question primarily with statistical survey data and present an array of tables that contrast parent-child religious transmission in 1970 (the commencement of the study) with 2005 (the thirty-five-year point of the study). To cite a core question of social science, the response to “has family influence declined?” is “it depends.” For example, the correlations between parents and children on “religious intensity” and “biblical

10. Glen Elder, ed., *Life Course Dynamics: Trajectories and Transitions, 1968–1980* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985); Tamara Hareven, ed., *Aging and Generational Relations: Life Course and Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1996).

literalism” have *increased* moderately (nine and five points, respectively), yet “religious participation” took a nine-point dip between 1970 and 2005 (55). In one of the more striking reports in the book, we see that four of the five major denominations sampled (Evangelical Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Catholic, Jewish) suffered losses with respect to the “percentage of parents whose young adult children have the same religious tradition” (58). The Evangelical and Jewish declines between 1970 and 2005 are significant but moderate (8 percent and 12 percent, respectively), but the Mainline (decline from 59 percent to 26 percent) and Catholic (decline from 84 percent to 43 percent) declines are substantial—both represent a relative loss of roughly half from 1970 to 2005.

The Mormons were the only denomination to increase in retention, moving up 18 points (from 67 percent to 85 percent). However, the Mormon increase in transmission/retention was surpassed by the “nones,” whose effectiveness in transmitting their lack of religious denomination increased 23 percentage points, from 40 percent to 63 percent. Following this increase, “nones” are transmitting their tradition (or abstention from tradition) with more effectiveness than all surveyed denominations except the Jewish (82 percent) and Mormon (85 percent) faiths.

Part 1 of the book (chapters 1, 2, and 3) conveys the message that, in spite of some documented declines, parents *do* continue to be a force in their children’s faith. In part 2, “Family Patterns and Religious Momentum across Generations” (chapters 4, 5, and 6), Bengtson and colleagues shift their attention to *how* and *why* families pass their faith on—or fail to do so. The authors explain that for “many young adults, parents have been the primary influence on their spiritual and religious development.” However, this primary influence can range from profoundly positive to destructively negative, in part because “relations with parents are linked to their first conceptions of God” (71). Chapter 4 invokes detailed qualitative case studies from seven different families to illustrate and animate the reality that the closeness and quality of parent-child relations matters significantly in religious transmission. Specifically, for all religious groups studied, the rate of transmission was at least 9 percentage points higher in “close” parent-child relationships than in those that were “not close.” Although there is mother-father variation of influence across faith and both parents are clearly significant influences, generally, “for religious transmission, having a close bond with one’s *father* matters even more than a close relationship with the mother” (76, emphasis in original). In one of the more important take-home messages from the book, the authors summarize, “in tightknit religious traditions such as

Mormon, Jewish, and Evangelical, the chances of passing on faith are highly dependent on the quality of parent-child relationships. . . . [Even] setting a good example, teaching the right beliefs and practices . . . [are] not sufficient for transmission” without “emotional bonding” (78).

Chapter 5, “The Unexpected Importance of Grandparents (and Great-Grandparents),” is the thinnest chapter in the book (both in terms of page count and in terms of depth and breadth of content). Predictably, grandparents matter significantly less than parents in terms of children’s religious development. However, readers are informed of the important reality that for an occasional child, a grandparent’s religious influence can be profound, consistent with the work of Burr and colleagues.¹¹

Chapter 6 addresses the question of how interfaith marriage and divorce affect religious continuity across generations. This chapter, like most, features an effective blending of quantitative data, visual tables, and qualitative narratives that add color. The brief answer to the interfaith portion of the above question is that “marrying someone from the same faith significantly increases the likelihood of religious transmission across generations. This is particularly true in . . . Judaism, Mormonism, [and] Conservative Protestantism” (121), and in marriages where both spouses are religiously involved together. The supporting data, offered later in the chapter, indicate more than two-thirds of children born to same-faith marriages “followed their parents’” faith, while less than one-fourth of children born to mixed-faith marriages followed *either* the mother’s or father’s faith (127). With respect to the question of divorce and religious continuity across generations, the apparent influence is relatively small. Previous research indicates that divorce (and remarriage) both diminish the likelihood of faith being successfully transmitted, but Bengtson and colleagues find a modest overall decrease of only 10 percentage points: 55 percent in intact marriages, 45 percent in families of divorce (117). An interesting point of my own extrapolation is that based on the above data: a child of divorce is still about twice as likely to follow the faith of their parent than a child in an interfaith marriage.

Part 3 (chapters 7–10) of *Families and Faith* addresses the question (and section title) “Will They Leave, or Will They Stay?” The first chapter in this section (7) presents a tripartite typology of “young adults who

11. Wesley Burr, Loren Marks, and Randal Day, *Sacred Matters: Religion and Spirituality in Families* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

have taken a very different spiritual path than a highly religious parent” (132). The three types include (1) rebels, who actively reject their parents’ religious beliefs and practices; (2) zealots, who are significantly more committed to faith than their parents; and (3) prodigals (or boomerangs), who experience a period of life as a rebel but return to their parents’ religious roots. The chapter is intriguing conceptually and presents detailed reconstructed histories of multiple families and three different types of outcomes (142), but this chapter is comparatively weak in terms of support from the quantitative data that buttress most of the book’s findings.

Chapter 8 offers insight into the families of nonreligious youth or “nones.” As in chapter 7, we are offered a typology—this time including (the self-explanatory) designations: (1) atheists, (2) agnostics, (3) religious but unaffiliated, and (4) religiously indifferent (147). These types are not fixed—the authors document some movement between categories—but these nuances help readers to see that not all “nones” are identical. A related note on the growing size of this group is that at the commencement of Bengtson’s project in 1970, 11 percent of participants reported “no religious affiliation.” The 2005 report revealed a 36 percent figure—a “more than 300% increase in just thirty-five years” (149). Four qualitative, family-level narratives reveal varied paths (from Catholic, Jewish, Mormon, and Nondenominational roots) to the “none” endpoint for the fourth generation. While variation within the “nones” is acknowledged, the authors emphasize on an implicitly complimentary note that “many of the nonreligious parents were more coherent and passionate about their ethical principles than some of the ‘religious’ parents in our study” (163).

Chapter 9, “The Power of Community: Families of Mormons, Jews, and Evangelicals,” will likely be the most fascinating chapter of *Families and Faith* for many *BYU Studies Quarterly* readers. At the chapter’s outset, the authors offer multiple reasons for this focused, in-depth comparison of these three faiths. Those reasons include: (1) these three religious traditions had “the highest degree of family continuity in religion across generations”; (2) all three groups are, at some level, minorities who have faced “ridicule or oppression”—with Mormons and Jews in particular sharing histories “rife with prejudice and persecution”; and (3) “in each of these religious groups religious practices are highly interconnected with family activities” (166), and high (often pinnacle) value is placed on keeping the faith across generations.

This chapter is based almost solely on qualitative methods but is careful, textured, and thorough in feel. Brief demographics of each faith are offered, but the qualitative data provide deeper insight and reveal that the authors have done their due diligence with the details. In discussing Mormon families, for example, the authors discuss early morning seminary, the LDS missionary program, family home evening, temple work, and the doctrine of eternal marriage and families. The authors also briefly foray into stickier issues including apostasy, the difficulties of prematurely ended missionary service, church discipline (such as excommunication), and children leaving the faith.

A four-page, multigenerational portrait of the Shepherd family does a more than credible job of capturing the vicissitudes of Mormon life in a family that strives hard but, like all of us, falls short of the celestial ideal. The children of the fourth generation prove to be a scattered lot. One family line features family stability and continuity, with thirteen of thirteen grandchildren still reportedly living as active and “practicing Mormons” (169–70). Another family line features reports of atheism, agnosticism, and a tendency toward no religious affiliation. The authors conclude the section on the four-generation Shepherd family by noting a significant rift between these family lines with “no indication of any efforts to reconcile this division” (171). The overall picture of the Mormon (or once-Mormon) Shepherd family exudes bittersweet authenticity. To be more precise, Bengtson and colleagues’ work here is not a snapshot; it is a very costly thirty-five-year motion picture.

Through the Shepherds, the Liebermans and Rosenbergs (the Jewish case study families), and the Wilsons (the Evangelical case study family), we are able to see, at some level, how individual and marital-level decisions often have echoes and influence “unto the third and fourth generation,” to borrow the Old Testament phrase. It is this perspective and vantage that, in my estimation, makes this book a unique and invaluable contribution to the expanding body of research on religion and family—a body based almost exclusively on one-time designs that offer snapshots but little sense of the process of time, much less the effective capturing and reflection of three and a half decades of continuity and change.

The transition from chapter 9 to 10 includes another pastiche of take-home bullet points—a list of top threats to religious transmission, if you will. It includes (1) “Marriage outside the faith or to someone who leaves the faith” (182); (2) parental religiosity—doing too little or

pushing too hard; (3) parental hypocrisy in terms of religious behavior; and (4) “other role models—aunts, uncles, grandparents—who discourage religious transmission” (182). In spite of these and other threats to religious transmission and continuity, the *Families and Faith* data nevertheless indicate that six out of ten young adult children report the same religious tradition as their parents (185).

In addition to summarizing key points from the volume, the concluding chapter delivers on its promised subtitle “What We Have Learned and How It Might Be Useful.” Bengtson, Putney, and Harris offer several pragmatic and application-based points. From a potential list of more than thirty, I feel the most valuable and relevant include the following:

- “Parental warmth is the key to successful [religious] transmission” (186).
- “Interfaith marriage and divorce deter religious transmission” (187).
- “Families *do matter* in determining the . . . religious outcomes of young adults, and they matter a great deal” (195, emphasis in original).
- “Fervent faith cannot compensate for a distant dad” (196). To borrow a phrase from Robert Ingersoll, “It is difficult for a child to find a father in God, unless the child first finds something of God in his father.”¹²
- “The most successful programs fostering intergenerational connections and the nurturing of families have been instituted by the Mormons, of which a prime example is their Family Home Evening” (202).
- “Take a long-range view.” In other words, when things go wrong, “don’t panic” and overcorrect (203). The race is long, which leads us to the final point:
- “Don’t give up on Prodigals, because many do return” (197). As the reader is aware, a living example is that of Vern Bengtson himself.

This book is made up of ten chapters, thirty-five years of quantitative and qualitative sociological field work, thirty-five hundred participants, and a literal lifetime of investment. Does Bengtson, Putney, and

12. Quoted in Marks and Dollahite, *Religion and Families*, 196.

Harris's *Families and Faith* warrant the appellation of *magnum opus*? I will raise the question but leave the judgment to others. Is it a book you should consider reading? Certainly. In my careful and considered judgment as a scholar of families and religion, this volume, as a complete work, represents one of the five most comprehensive and expansive studies yet published at the nexus of religion and family life.

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