

# CHRISTIAN HEADS, HEARTS, AND HANDS

ARTICLES TO FORM US AS FOLLOWERS OF “THE WAY”-- A TOP 5 ARTICLE FROM 2021

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## Keeping the Faith

by Christian Smith

The more religiously committed parents are, the more they want their children to grow up believing and practicing the family’s religion. This is especially true of parents who are religiously traditionalist or conservative. The desire to pass on the faith to offspring in a world that does not seem to support that goal can put great pressure on religious parents not to “fail.”

Most religious parents know that the number of non-religious Americans has grown in recent decades, especially among youth. They know that their culture valorizes autonomous self-definition, expects some degree of youth rebellion, and exerts forces they view as undermining religion. Every religious parent has heard stories about children of faithful parents who grow up to neglect or reject religion. That can be heartbreaking, and the worry that it may happen with one’s own children can be a burden.

After spending two decades studying the religious and spiritual lives of American adolescents and emerging adults, I turned to studying religious parenting. As a sociologist, I sought not to produce a “how-to” book, but to understand how American religious parents approach the task of handing on religion to their children. Nonetheless, my years studying - intergenerational family religious dynamics have produced clear findings, which suggest implications for parents interested in the religious formation of their children.

The good news is that, among all possible influences, parents exert far and away the greatest influence on their children’s religious outcomes. Stated differently, the bad news is that nearly all human responsibility for the religious trajectories of children’s lives falls on their parents’ shoulders. The empirical evidence is clear. In almost every case, no other institution or program comes close to shaping youth religiously as their parents do—not religious congregations, youth groups, faith-based schools, missions and service trips, summer camps, Sunday school, youth ministers, or anything else. Those influences can reinforce the influence of parents, but almost never do they surpass or override it. What makes every other influence pale into virtual insignificance is the importance (or not) of the religious beliefs and practices of American parents *in their ordinary lives*—not only on holy days but every day, throughout weeks and years. American youth who have grown up to be religiously committed almost always had parents who were very religiously committed. Successfully passing on faith is by no means guaranteed. Outcomes vary widely. Children choose their own lives. But setting aside exceptional cases, what *is* nearly guaranteed is that American parents who are not especially committed, attentive, and intentional in passing on their faith will produce children who are less religious than they are, if they are religious at all. That knowledge may trouble some parents, but it can also empower.

So, what can committed, religious parents do to increase their chances of raising children who, as young adults, believe and practice some version of their religion? The first answer is simply to *be themselves*: believe and practice their own religion genuinely and faithfully. Children are not fooled by performances. They see reality. And when that reality is authentic and life-giving, they just may be attracted to something similar. Beyond this “walk the talk” advice, a number of specific traits tend to influence children religiously. Here are a few of the most important.

*Parenting Style.* Though the influence of parenting style is known to vary somewhat by race and ethnicity, it is broadly true that the religious parents who most successfully raise religious children tend to exhibit an “authoritative” parenting style. Such parents combine two crucial traits. First, they consistently hold their children to clear and demanding expectations, standards, and boundaries in all areas of life. Second, they relate to their children with an abundance of warmth, support, and expressive care. It is not hard to see why this parenting style works best for raising religious children. The combination of clear expectations and affective warmth is powerful in children’s developmental formation.

Nor is it hard to see why the alternatives fare worse. Parents who are strict and demanding with their children, yet exhibit little emotional warmth or support, enact an “authoritarian” parenting style. They provide their children little opportunity for bonding, engagement, and identification, and hence make it difficult for them to internalize an identification with the parents’ concerns. Parents who are all affection and empathy but offer their children few boundaries and standards exhibit a “permissive” parenting style, signaling to their children that it doesn’t matter much what they do, including where religion is concerned. And parents who give their children neither affective warmth nor clear expectations display a “passive” parenting style, which likewise provides little basis for passing on religion. In short, American children are more likely to embrace the religion of their parents when they enjoy a relationship with them that expresses both clear parental authority and affective warmth. Such children know that their parents hold them to high standards precisely because they love them. They also know that when they fail to meet those standards there will be consequences, but never will those consequences include the withdrawal of love and support. The other three parenting styles do not convey these messages as clearly, and the consequences for passing on religion are empirically evident. It doesn’t work as well.

*Routine Talking about Religion.* A second trait of parents who successfully pass on religious faith and practice to their children is that, as a normal part of family life *during the week*, they talk with their children about religious things—what they believe and practice, what it means and implies, and why it matters to them. In such families, religion is part of the warp and woof of everyday life. It comes and goes in talk easily. It is not compartmentalized in certain slots of the week, nor is it an unusual or awkward topic. It is part of “who we are and what we care about.” This does not mean such families talk about religion all of the time. But it does indicate to children that religion matters, and that it is relevant enough to the rest of life that it should arise normally in ordinary discussions of any number of topics.

Again, this is a matter of parents and families being authentically who and what they are, not suddenly deciding to sermonize. So, right up there with the importance of parents’ personal religious faith and the consistency of their religious practice is this variable: how much religion is talked about at home during the week. Children who later in life practice some form of their parents’ religion report that religion was a frequent topic of discussion at home during their youth. And those who say that religion was seldom or never discussed are much less likely to be very religious later on.

Parents are also more likely to succeed in passing on religion to their children if they allow their children to explore and express their own ideas and feelings along the way, though without letting discussions turn into relativistic free-for-alls. This means granting a freedom to consider doubts, complications, and alternatives without fear of condemnation, *combined with* parents’ seriously engaging their children and expressing to them their own beliefs, reasons, and hopes. Parents who either slam down the hammer on anything deemed unacceptable or convey a comfort with “whatever” will be less successful.

*Channeling for Internalization.* I said above that nonparental influences—congregations, youth groups, religious schools, and so on—pale in comparison to the influence of parents. That does not mean that these other factors are irrelevant. They can make a difference in the religious formation of youth, but normally they do so because religiously committed and intentional parents “arrange” for it.

Sociologists of religion call this religious “channeling.” The idea is that parents channel their children into involvements and relationships that reinforce (not replace) their more direct parental influence. Channeling means subtly nudging, introducing, and steering children in the “right” religious directions. Good channeling is purposeful and even strategic but not controlling or overbearing. It creates opportunities, makes introductions, and encourages involvement. It does not coerce or bribe children into religion.

The goal of religious channeling is for children to personalize and internalize their religious faith and identity over time. When channeling is effective, children, as they approach independent adulthood, think of themselves more as people who believe and practice their own faith, rather than as kids who go along with their parents. Channeling arranges in the lives of children a variety of influences that will help this transition happen.

Research suggests that among the most important of these channeling influences is the presence of non-family adults in religious congregations who know the children well and can engage them in talk on serious topics, beyond superficial chitchat. The more such adults are present, the more a church, temple, synagogue, or mosque feels like a community or an extended family, which is itself a strong bonding force. Parents who channel effectively know how to encourage the development of such congregational relationships for their children. Religious parents can channel their children in other effective ways. One way is to advocate for congregational investments in quality youth groups and youth ministers, and then to foster children’s involvement in them. Another is to pay attention to who their children’s friends are and encourage closer friendships with those whose influence seems most positive. Parents can involve their families in religious retreats, service projects, and other activities that children may find fun and where they may build relationships. Depending on the family and circumstances, exposing children to the right forms of religious media, summer camps, and religious education may add extra “layers” of religious contacts, experiences, and models, which increase the chances that religious faith and practice will “take” in a way that is personal and internalized. However channeling is done, the purpose is to facilitate, not coerce, religious connections, networks, and growth.

Important here is the framing of religious formation as a series of steps toward adult practice, not requirements for religious “graduation.” Religious rites of passage, such as Confirmation and bar and bat mitzvahs, can be important formative experiences. But they can also come to be viewed as obligations that children need to “get out of the way” to appease parents. It is important, if often difficult, to avoid this outlook. For when religious involvements are defined as requirements for graduation, they unintentionally facilitate religious exiting.

Coming to terms with the realities described above can be difficult for many parents. For some, the responsibility seems overwhelming. Others are afraid that by trying too hard to socialize their children religiously, they will provoke rebellion. Still others are encumbered by complications such as unsupportive spouses, mental illness in the family, divorce, and other factors beyond their control. And still other parents embrace the task so earnestly that they are crushed by self-doubt and guilt when their children do not turn out as hoped or planned. It bears remembering that nothing about this process is guaranteed. Life is complicated, and children are finally the agents of their own development. Parents do have a major influence on their children religiously, but that influence is never complete, controlling, or surefire. What parents can do—really, all they can do—is practice in their own lives the faith they hope their children will embrace; build warm, authoritative relationships with their children; be mindful and intentional about steering children into relationships and activities that can help personalize religion internally; and then pray and hope that the divine forces in which they believe will lead their children into lives of truth, goodness, and beauty.