11. THE TRANSMISSION OF RELIGIOUS VALUES

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Abstract

With relatively few exceptions, adults are religious because faith was inculcated in childhood and adolescence. Religious socialization by parents can occur in a multitude of conscious and unconscious ways. The habits and ideas that children bring into adult life are shaped in a wider social context, however, so the environment also matters. In previous research, we found that both parental influence and national context are important in the religious socialization of children, but they are largely independent of each other. Nevertheless, the hypothesis that devout parents in secular societies pay particular attention to their children's religious upbringing seems plausible. If the culture does not reinforce their values, parents have to make some extra effort to defend the faith. We can test directly whether they do so, using data from the European Values Study. We find no evidence that people for whom religion is important in life feel a greater commitment, in absolute or even relative terms, to the religious socialization of children in the home if they live in a secular rather than a religious society. On the contrary, religious contexts seem to reinforce religious values and behavior, including the importance attached to raising children in the faith.

11.1 Introduction

Values are basic convictions that are prior to, and help to organize, more particular attitudes, actions and moral judgments. The question of how and why values are changing is important because values determine what people care about. The extent to which those things include national identity, religion, ethnicity, gender equality, the environment, and so on has profound social and political effects. The concept of 'value change' – perhaps rivalled only by 'globalization' and 'social capital' – has captured the imagination of both social scientists and the general public.

In a volume edited by Arts and Halman several years ago, I argued that "Secularization remains the paradigm of value change" (Voas & Doebler, 2013, p. 249). In what follows we describe some recent work on the role of parents and the national environment in this process, including findings from the EVS. It is appropriate to offer this chapter as a tribute to Loek Halman, because religion and secularization have featured prominently in his scholarly contributions from the outset (see Halman et al., 1987).

11.2 Religious Socialization

Studies of age, period and cohort effects on religious involvement show that secularization is largely the result of generational replacement (Voas & Chaves, 2016). In most Western countries, each birth cohort is on average less religious than the one before. Religious identity, belief and practice typically persist over the adult life course. Some individuals do change, but within any given birth cohort these changes largely amount to self-cancelling noise (Voas & Crockett, 2005, Voas & Chaves, 2016). Generations are noteworthy for their aggregate stability.

The success or failure of religious socialization is the primary determinant of whether religion gains or loses strength (Storm & Voas, 2012). With relatively few exceptions, adults are religious because faith was inculcated in childhood and adolescence. Similarly, people raised without a religion tend to remain non-reli-

gious, at least in secular societies. Religious transmission within families is far more important than any other factor in explaining variation in religiosity.

Religious socialization by parents can occur in a multitude of conscious and unconscious ways, including teaching and learning, participation and habit formation, modelling and imitation, and so on. The degree of parental influence is a contested issue, however. Nature and nurture within families only account for a portion of the variation in complex behavioral traits (Turkheimer, 2000, p. 160), and some studies suggest that the direct influence of parents' religious behavior is rather small (Erickson, 1992, p. 149). The multiple forms of socialization often vary by religious tradition in their effects (Vaidyanathan, 2011).

In any event, even direct parental influence can be complicated. According to social learning theory, the extent to which religious and political values are transmitted to the next generation depends on the strength and consistency of the parents' behavior (Jennings et al., 2009, p. 783). For example, parents are more likely to have churchgoing children if both attend rather than only one (Francis & Brown, 1991; Voas & Crockett, 2005; Voas & Storm, 2012). Moreover, agreement between the parents (Hoge et al., 1982; Myers, 1996) and consistency of beliefs and behaviors (Bader & Desmond, 2006) are important predictors of successful transmission of religious involvement. Divorce can disrupt religious socialization, though its impact depends on circumstances (Uecker & Ellison, 2012).

Parenting style may have effects on religious transmission that are difficult to predict. Some studies suggest that people who grow up with parents who combine support with strictness are more likely to be religious (Dudley & Wisbey, 2000; Myers, 1996). The warmth of the parent-child relationship has also been found to be associated with successful religious transmission (Bengtson, 2013). Individual autonomy is a strong value among young people, however, and "most U.S. teens are at least somewhat allergic to anything they view as *trying* to influence them" (Smith, 2005, p. 144). Dutch people who grew up being strictly monitored by their parents are less likely to attend church as adults (Vermeer et al., 2012). The influence of different kinds of parenting may depend

on the cultural context. Parents lay the groundwork for religious values and behavior, but if the social environment does not accept and support their religiosity, children are likely to reject it as they come of age.

In addition to direct effects, parents also influence religiosity via indirect pathways. Most of the effect of parents on adolescent religious attendance is arguably mediated through peer and educational influences (Erickson, 1992). Parents affect where the family lives, whom the children encounter, whom they trust, which schools they attend, and what media they consume (Erickson, 1992, p. 142; Jennings et al., 2009, p. 795). The environment is not under their control, but they can choose and regulate it to some extent.

Identity, beliefs and behavior do not derive from families alone, however. The habits and ideas that children bring into adult life are shaped in a wider social context. Young people interact with siblings, peer groups, popular culture, teachers and other adult authorities. These other sources of influence may help to solidify the religious values inculcated by parents, or they may do the reverse (Erickson, 1992, p. 140; Desmond et al., 2010).

While religious doctrines and rituals are often aimed at vertical transmission to a far greater extent than horizontal transmission (through conversion), not all religious parents undertake the task with diligence. Religious socialization in secular society can be onerous. It is not easy to control children's social environments, particularly once they begin to interact with others outside the parental home. Kelley and De Graaf (1997, p. 641) describe the difficulty facing devout parents in predominantly secular societies: "To ensure that their children acquire and retain orthodox religious beliefs, they need to control their children's social environment and restrict their choices of friends to those with compatible religious beliefs." Parents who are significantly more religious (or differently religious) than society at large need a dual commitment: not only to the faith, but to the importance of its transmission.

Moreover, many parents, regardless of religious preference, accept the 'modern' values of independence and self-determination. If children are allowed to make up their own minds, there is a limit to how much family pressure can be applied to promote religious involvement. What characterizes late modernity is not only a move away from traditional and towards secular-rational values, but also a shift from survival-orientated towards self-expression values (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). Thus, value change creates a double handicap for religious socialization: religion loses prestige (Bruce, 2011), and at the same time parents become increasingly reluctant to impose their own beliefs and practices on their children.

While religious parents may have stricter parenting styles on average, it is not evident that in secular countries they are able to impose conservative morality to counter the influence of liberal self-expression values. Their traditionalism may be less intense than in other societies. Several studies have found a weaker relationship between individual religiosity and conservative morality in less religious countries (Finke & Adamczyk, 2008; Scheepers et al., 2002; Storm, 2016).

11.3 The Effect of the Environment

While religious parents generally raise religious children, the trends imply that parents' religiosity is not perfectly reproduced in their children. Other socializing influences such as peers, education and popular culture affect the religious involvement of young people, shaping their habits in adulthood. Indeed, belief and practice are most likely to be transmitted when they are taken for granted, that it to say, when children do not become aware that there are alternatives.

How much do parents matter, compared to the social context, in the religious socialization of young people? Does the influence of parents differ between countries, depending on the national levels of religiosity? And if it does vary, do parents devote more effort to transmitting their worldviews when the national culture is supportive, or when they wish to offset its influence?

A key issue is whether parents make more or less of an effort to transmit their religious beliefs and practices when people around them have similar views. One hypothesis is that religious parents work harder to instill religious com-

mitment in places where the social environment is relatively secular. An alternative hypothesis is that they feel less inclination to undertake religious socialization in such contexts – or if they do, they may be led into counter-productive strictness. Conversely, where religious involvement is recognized as having high value, parents feel encouraged to pass it on. The null hypothesis is that the parents' and wider society's levels of religiosity are both important, but their effects are independent of each other.

Kelley and De Graaf (1997) examined the relative influence of parents and the national context on religious beliefs in 15 historically Christian Western countries. They found that the national level of religiosity not only affects the effectiveness of intergenerational transmission of religiosity, but also the relative influence of parents. Their claim is that "in relatively secular nations, family religiosity strongly shapes children's religious beliefs, while the influence of national religious context is small; in relatively religious nations family religiosity, although important, has less effect on children's beliefs than does national context" (Kelley & De Graaf, 1997, p. 655). They explain the finding by arguing that religious parents in secular countries put extra effort into religious socialization to try to ensure that their children keep the faith.[1]

We re-examined the evidence and found that there does not in fact appear to be any substantial interaction between parental influence and national context (Voas & Storm, 2021). Both are important in the socialization of children, but they are largely independent of each other. To the extent that there is any national influence on religious transmission from parents to children, a more religious environment slightly increases rather than decreases the effect of parental religiosity.

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[1]   Other explanations are possible if the observation is correct: the religious might tend be socially separated from the mainstream in secular societies, for example, in which case the effectiveness of religious socialization could be the result of separation rather than effort.

11.4 Additional Evidence on Religious Socialization

In Voas and Storm (2021), we looked at the outcomes of religious socialization to test the claim that parents make more difference in secular than in religious societies. Although we rejected that hypothesis, the proposed mechanism – that devout parents in secular societies pay particular attention to their children's religious upbringing – seems plausible. If the culture does not reinforce their values, parents have to make some extra effort to defend the faith. We can test directly whether they do so.

In the European Values Study (EVS) 2008, respondents were asked which qualities children should be encouraged to learn at home. The key question reads "Here is a list of qualities that children can be encouraged to learn at home. Which, if any, do you consider to be especially important? Please choose up to five." The qualities are: good manners, independence, hard work, feeling of responsibility, imagination, tolerance and respect for other people, thrift, saving money and things, determination, perseverance, religious faith, unselfishness, obedience.

Religious parents in secular societies will recognize that their children are unlikely to acquire faith unless they learn it at home. If Kelley and De Graaf (1997) are right, such parents might be expected to make this quality a particular priority, and more so than if they lived in a religious environment.

The EVS also has a question about the subjective importance of religion. Respondents were asked "Please say, for each of the following how important it is in your life...," one of the items being "Religion." The answer options were "Very Important," "Quite important," "Not important" and "Not at all important."

We can calculate the percentage of people who think that religion is a key quality for children to learn at home as a function of the importance of religion in their own lives. The proportion of people who see religion as very important in their lives varies considerably across the continent – from 10 percent in Northern Europe to 37 percent in Southern Europe. In all regions, roughly half of the very religious regard faith as a key quality for children to acquire: somewhat

more in Eastern, Central and Southern Europe, and somewhat less in Northern Europe.

Figure 11.1 shows how the desire to make faith a priority in raising children varies across Europe.[2] As we would expect, religious people are more likely than the nonreligious to say that faith is important for children to learn at home, wherever they live. At every level of subjective religiosity, however, people in relatively religious regions are more committed to religious socialization in the home than residents of more secular countries. These regional differences are just as large among people for whom religion is important as among the more secular.

Figure 11.1 Religious faith is a key quality for children to acquire, by importance of religion and region
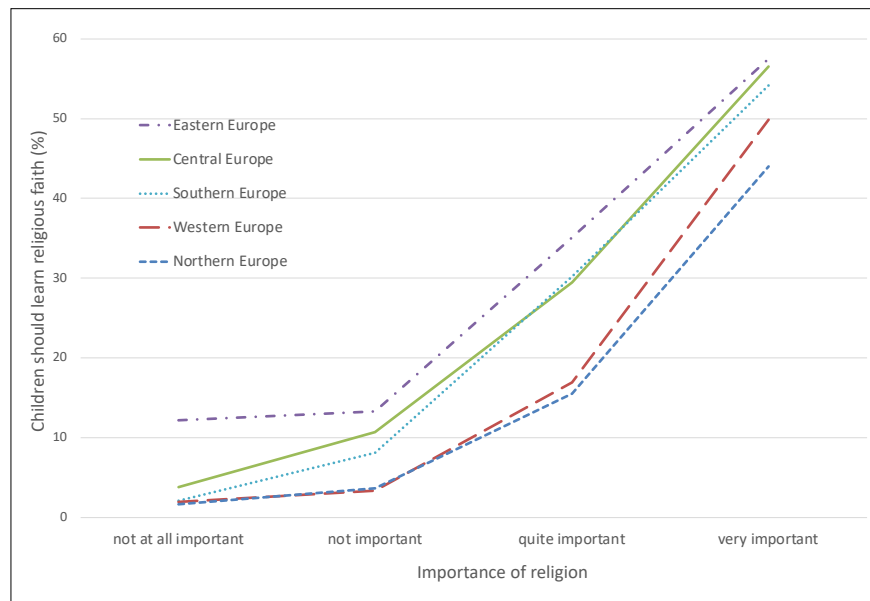
Source: EVS 2008. Weighted data; unweighted N=51,847.

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2   As an alternative to looking at regions, we conducted the same analysis with the 48 countries divided into quartiles based on national means on a religiosity scale. The results are essentially identical.

In summary, there is no evidence that people for whom religion is important in life feel a greater commitment, in absolute or even relative terms, to the religious socialization of children in the home if they live in a secular rather than a religious society. On the contrary, religious contexts seem to reinforce religious values and behavior, including the importance attached to raising children in the faith.

11.5 Conclusion

We found that parental and respondent religious involvement are not more strongly associated in secular than in religious countries. On the contrary, parents have very much the same influence on average across different societies. Religious parents in secular countries are less rather than more committed to the domestic religious socialization of their children, compared to their counterparts in religious countries.

Transmission from one generation to the next does not fail because parents cease to be religious. Religious socialization fails because of a general change in attitudes to both socialization and religion. Wanting children to make their own choices and regarding religion as a personal choice are attitudes that have become increasingly common in the West (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005; Norris & Inglehart, 2004). This cultural shift may affect not only parenting styles and parental religiosity but also young people's reactions to these influences.

Even very religious people living in secular societies are influenced by value change in the wider culture. They are likely to accept at least in part the concern for personal freedom that is associated with secularization, even while maintaining their religious identity, beliefs and practice. Regarding religion as a personal preference not to be inflicted on others is an expression of a general respect for individual autonomy (Smith, 2005, p. 160). Moreover, religious exclusivism is now widely rejected in Western countries: 80 percent of respondents in the 2008 International Social Survey Program (ISSP) agree that all religions should be respected.

Parental efforts to offset contrary social influences may be found in some families, but they do not happen on a large enough scale to override contextual influences. The end result is that both parents and context matter to religious practice and belief, but the degree of parental influence is similar across Europe and beyond. The EVS has contributed greatly to our understanding of such phenomena, and Loek Halman deserves our thanks for leading the program and providing continuity with its founding principles.

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