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Article

Parental Influence and Intergenerational Transmission of Religious Belief, Attitudes, and Practices: Recent Evidence from the United States

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Abstract: A traditionally salient topic of empirical investigation in the sociology of religion, this paper seeks to offer a recent investigation into the intergenerational transmission of religion and the parental forms of religious engagement that predict adult engagement with religion. The study of this paper explores the intergenerational transmission of religion, focusing on the parental forms of religious identity and engagement that influence religious identity, beliefs, and practices in adulthood. By analyzing the 2018 GSS dataset in the United States with multiple regression analyses, I find strong parental and childhood influences on adult religiosity, religious service attendance, and belief in God. Indeed, this engagement often mirrors parental engagement for these variables. However, while paternal religious identity often predicts these religious variables, I find that the religious identity and engagement of parents generally does not predict religious identity in adulthood. Ultimately, while these results generally show strong predictive mechanisms of intergenerational transmission, they also illustrate that these relationships are variably dependent on the form of parental and adult religious engagement and which parent participates or is associated with that engagement.

Keywords: belief in god; intergenerational transmission; parents; religion; religiosity; religious identity; religious service attendance

1. Introduction

In sociological investigations of religion, one prominent subject of extensive debate and research is the factors that influence religious identity, religiosity, and religious engagement (e.g. religious service attendance). Within this previous research, one central question is whether such influence comes, and to what degree, from someone's background, especially their upbringing and parental influence. A related question is whether the influence exerted in one's social background via these familial mechanisms continues their influence into one's current situation (e.g. Ploch and Hastings 1998). Likewise, if so, which factors exactly have this kind of staying power of influence? Understanding the magnitude and dynamics of intergenerational religious influence and transmission has been a salient concern of social scientists in recent decades (e.g. Hoge and Petrillo 1978; Willits and Crider 1989; Ploch and Hastings 1992; Myers 1996; Voas and Crockett 2005). Therefore, because religious transmission is a dynamic, and necessarily a generationally sensitive, phenomenon, there is a need for constant empirical observation and update. I thus seek with this paper to provide a recent empirical update to this corpus of work to understand which results can still be confirmed and whether there are any new observations in understanding the intergenerational transmission of religion.

In answer to these foundational research objectives, some have found potent influence of upbringing. For instance, Voas and Crockett (2005) argue that how someone is raised is the single best predictor of their current religious involvement, even as this relationship is not one to one, with parental transmission of religion less potent than parental transmission of religious absence. Additionally, even if people may be slightly less religious than their parents, and few are more religious, the phenomena of parental influence upon religious belief and engagement is relatively stable across global societies (Storm and Voas 2012).

I set out in this paper to critically compare and contrast variables associated with the religious dimensions of social origin and assess whether those influence continue into people's current religious life. I do so by assessing whether these influences that are more predictive of personal religious beliefs and engagement in adulthood. Towards this research aim, I ask the following guiding question: What is the nature and strength of the relationship between parental religious identity and practice and adult religious practice in the United States today, if any? The United States provides a particularly fertile research environment to provide updated answers to this question because of the high quality social survey data on religion, its high prevalence of religion, and the comparatively high social influence that Religion exerts in this national context (Bengston et al. 2009).

2. Parents and intergenerational religious transmission

The influence of religious social origins in shaping religious behavior in both childhood and adulthood is a consistent theme in the broader scholarly discourse on religious continuity and evolution. When considering social origin in this paper I focus on the influence of parents primarily, and childhood engagement secondarily, with both being nearly inextricably linked to each other. Despite profound societal changes across the world over the last half-century, including both secularization and diversification of religious and spiritual beliefs in much of the world, the family remains a primary source and incubator of dispositions towards religious belief that influence both of these broader trends. Indeed, the family is a primary site of religious reproduction, perhaps especially in irreligious households (e.g. Pusztai and Demeter-Karászi, 2019).

It is in this context that Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2001) argues for a 'chain of memory' as the mechanism of intergenerational religious transmission, whereby this transmission is sustained by collective rituals and teachings within a community, be it a religious or familial community in the place of a more universal collectivity. These collective rituals may include prominent variables of this study, such as religious service attendance, and the religious belief of parents may contribute to the type of teachings which form such a chain of memory. However, the universality of Hervieu-Léger's work across the broad spectrum of religious belief has also been questioned (e.g. Greaves, 2009). In particular, Greaves (2009) argues that orientations to institutions, traditions, and thus the role of iconoclasm differs widely among 'religions', and thus the experience and trends of religion generally, and Christianity particularly, in traditionally Christian contexts are not able to be universally applicable. Indeed, even among countries of different Christian denominational entrenchment, differences have been found regarding changes in intergenerational religious orientation (e.g. Molteni and Biolcati, 2018). This indeed may also be the case within many of the same societies that experience a substantial measure of religious pluralism, such as the United States.

Much prior research has shown that religious adherence, attitudes, and behaviors of parents contribute to the intergenerational transmission of religious belief, attitudes towards religion and religious concepts, and behaviors such as prayer or church attendance (Bao et al. 1999; Bader and Desmond 2006; Baker-Sperry 2001; Bengston et al. 2009; Francis 1993; Güngör, Fleischmann, and Phalet 2011; Hardie, Pearce, and Denton 2016; Jennings et al. 2009; Myers 1996; Patacchini and Zenou 2016; Ploch and Hastings 1998; Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, and Waite 1995; Storm and Voas 2012; Thornton, Axinn, and Hill 1992; Voas and Crockett 2005; Voas and Storm 2012). This is true even as a minority of studies investigating such dynamics find that these influences do not hold into adulthood (e.g. Willits and Crider 1989), that the strength of this transmission mechanism is relatively weak (Hoge and Petrillo 1978; Hoge, Petrillo, and Smith 1982), or that the effects are highly variable (Wilson and Sandomirsky, 1991), which is perhaps a product of other, potentially less overtly religious influences of past or present environment, such as social and cultural networks or participation (e.g. Gemar 2020, 2022, 2023; McAndrew and Richards, 2020; Patacchini 2016; Ploch and Hastings 1998). The highly variable, and sometimes incomplete, lessened, or absent transmission of religious belief and engagement is ultimately a source of decline in affiliations with many religions of the world and attendant secularization (Chaves 1989; Voas and Crockett 2005; Voas and Storm 2012).

For those studies which have found parental (and in some cases also grandparental) influence as a significant mechanism in the intergenerational transmission of religious belief, attitudes, and

engagement, there is variability in the precise elements of religion and modes of transmission found. One prominent topic of study in this regard is the intergenerational transmission of religious service attendance, often specifically (Christian) churchgoing (e.g. Bao et al. 1999; Bader and Desmond 2006; Hardie, Pearch, and Denton 2016; Ploch and Hastings 1998; Voas and Storm 2012). For instance, Ploch and Hastings (1998) find small but statistically significant relationships between parental religious service attendance and the attendance of their adult children, finding that while also small (and statistically significant), it is rather marital status and having children currently that is more predictive of attendance. From a slightly different perspective, this type of finding is echoed more recently by Schleifer and Chaves (2017), who find that adding a school aged child in the household directly leads to an increase in the family's religious service attendance, something which in turn may have a circular effect upon transmission to the child. However, Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, and Waite (1995) argue that the effect of children on church membership is highly variable.

Among other more recent studies, Bader and Desmond (2006) found that high frequency and consistency of parental attendance at religious services were an important predictor and influence of intergenerational religious transmission. They also found, however, that when parental attendance is inconsistent, then it is rather the importance that parents place upon religion that is more important than attendance as an intergenerational transmission mechanism, even as any incongruence between these two tends to diminish the effect of each (Bader and Desmond 2006). Both parental religious affiliation and service attendance has also been found to be a mitigating influence on adolescent decline in religious service attendance as they age into important life course events (Hardie, Pearce, and Denton 2016). Voas and Storm (2012) find that this parental influence is most potent and predictive of the intergenerational transmission of churchgoing when both parents attend church when the child is young, rather than only one parent.

With respect to other forms of parental and socialized origin influence upon the intergenerational transmission of religion, there are varied findings of both mechanisms (e.g. religiosity, identity) and the magnitude of the relationship. One foundational study by Myers (1996) focuses on the important influence of parental religiosity. Myers (1996) finds that the religiosity of adult children is highly predicted by the religiosity of one's parents.

One way that variability in this relational influence is found is by considering which type of religion is being passed down, and in which context. For instance, Jacob and Kalter (2013) find that religiosity among Muslim immigrant families is highly stable, or even increases among generations, while for Christian immigrant families, inter-generational religiosity tends to decline. This again highlights the differences that might exist across religious groups in the same context, especially if religion becomes tied to other forms of identity. Similarly, Güngör, Fleischmann, and Phalet (2011) find that intergenerational transmission into adult religiosity (including identity, beliefs, and practices) among Muslims within historically Christian and secularized contexts is remarkably strong. The reason for this increased religious transmission was argued to be the effect of a continued emphasis on the broader cultural heritage among the families and broader community of these groups (Güngör, Fleischmann, and Phalet 2011).

Another way that the variable impacts of inter-generational religious transmissions is seen is via the influence of different parents upon different types of children. For instance, While Francis and Brown (1991) find that the effect of parental religiosity decreases for children as they age into adolescents, Francis (1993) later finds that parental influence actually increases as children grow through adolescents. Francis (1993) also finds that mothers' religious practice was a more powerful predictor of both son and daughter practice than fathers' influence. Gutierrez et al. (2014) finds strong mothers had the strongest socializing role within the familial structure and the most predictive influence on intergenerational religious transmission to children. However, men may also be disproportionately influenced by their father's religious behavior in childhood because of sons emulating their fathers (Gutierrez et al., 2014). Hayes and Pittelkow (1993) argue that gendered differences in religious supervision may affect the nature of religious transmission between parents, although the general parental influence is the primary predictor of transmission. Given this prior literature, I also focus in this research on understanding the potential differential influence of

maternal and paternal religious identity and engagement on the religious identity, beliefs, and practices of adult offspring.

The next sections on the data, methods, and findings of the research in this paper give more detailed information as to the variables used for going about finding both aggregate and differential predictive capacity of parental and childhood variables on adult engagement with religion. From this prior literature and empirical research on the intergenerational transmission of religion, I approach our guiding research question moving forward with the following hypotheses:

H1: *There will be a noticeable relationship between childhood and parental religious belief and practice and the current belief and practice of the respondents in this research.*

H2: *This relationship will be variable in presence or degree among different religious groups, and among different parents.*

3. Data and methods

The research for this paper utilizes data from the General Social Survey (GSS), which is a leading national survey research program of the United States, with the aim of gauging current public views, attitudes, and social behaviors. Managed by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago, the GSS has been regularly conducted since 1972, comprising 34 survey cycles from 1972 to 2022, with 2018, 2021, and 2022 the most iterations. Because the specific questions often shift between survey cycles to reflect evolving societal concerns and prevalent areas of interest for researchers, I use here the 2018 iteration of GSS (n=2348). The demographic information of this sample largely tracks the US Census Bureau's 2018 estimates for the core demographic variables of age, sex, and race in the population that is 18 or older (see Table A1). However, while the categories for age and sex more closely track the census data, as does the Black proportion of the sample, there is an overrepresentation of White Americans and an underrepresentation of other races.

This is the most recent cycle of the GSS which includes all of the necessary information for the research of this article, specifically information about parental religious engagement. Questions about parental religious service attendance was previously asked in 2008, 1998, and 1991, which were also the same previous GSS years that asked about childhood religious services attendance, mother's religious identification when the respondent was a child, and father's religious identification when they were a child.

The statistical methods used for the analysis of this paper are multinomial regression analyses. This type of regression analysis allowed us to efficaciously capture predictive effects of prior and parental religious influence variables on current variables of adult respondent religious identification and engagement. The specific variables used to capture prior and parental religious influence were the religious service attendance of each of the respondent's mother and father when the respondent was a child, the childhood religious service attendance of the respondent (at the age of 12), the respondent's mother's religion when the respondent was a child, and the respondent's father's religion when they were a child. These five variables represent the independent variables for the regression analyses of this paper, and the categories that I use for each variable can be viewed in Table 1. The relative frequencies of each of these categories within the GSS sample also appear in Table 1.

I likewise used five different dependent variables in the regression analyses so as to be able to compare if parental and childhood influence is stronger on different aspects of religious engagement and identification. These five variables are religious service attendance, religious preference (i.e. identity), strength of affiliation with that religious identity, self-rated religiosity, and the change in the respondent's belief in God over the course of their life. The specific categories and relative frequencies for each of these variables can again be viewed in Table 1. In general, the relative frequencies of these variables illustrate the continued importance of religion within contemporary American society. By using this high quality dataset and these multiple regression analyses I am able to understand if any of these prior and parental influence have predictive power on any of the current

religious identities and activities of their adult children, which parental characteristics are most influential, and which current forms of current religiosity and religious engagement are most impacted.

Table 1. Relative frequencies of the ten religious variables used in the regression analyses of this paper.

	Relative frequency
	(GSS)
<i>Dependent variables</i>	
Religiosity	
Very religious	15.5%
Moderately religious	37.7%
Slightly religious	25.2%
Not religious	21.6%
Religious service attendance	
Every week or more	22.9%
Almost every week	12.4%
Several times/yr. to 1/month	16.4%
Once a year or less	18.5%
Never	29.5%
Strength of religious affiliation	
Strong affiliation	23.4%
Low to medium affiliation	42.2%
No religion	34.4%
Change in belief in God	
Believe now and always have	73.6%
Believe now but not before	11.0%
Not now but did	9.7%
Not now and not ever	5.8%
Religious identity	
Protestant	47.6%
Catholic	23.5%
Jewish	1.6%
Other	1.5%
Buddhism	0.8%
Hinduism	0.3%
Islam	0.8%
Orthodox Christian (Greek, Russian, etc.)	0.3%
No religion	
<i>Independent variables</i>	
Childhood rel. service attendance^b	
Every week or more	54.5%
2-3/mo. to nearly 1/week	15.6%
Several times/yr. to 1/mo.	10.5%
Once a year or less	9.0%
Never	10.4%
Mother's attendance	
Every week or more	49.9%
2-3/mo. to nearly 1/week	12.0%
Several times/yr. to 1/mo.	11.4%
1-2/yr. or less	12.1%
No mother present	0.9%
Never	13.7%

Father’s attendance	
Every week or more	35.2%
2-3/mo. to nearly 1/week	10.0%
Several times/yr. to 1/mo.	12.4%
1-2/yr. or less	14.6%
No mother present	5.4%
Never	22.5%
Father’s religion	
Protestant	43.0%
Catholic	36.1%
Jewish	1.8%
Orthodox Christian	0.4%
Muslim	1.1%
Other	1.1%
No religion	16.5%
Mother’s religion	
Protestant	50.1%
Catholic	36.7%
Jewish	1.7%
Orthodox Christian	0.5%
Muslim	0.9%
Other	1.3%
No religion	8.6%

4. Findings

Our regression analyses consist of seven separate multinomial logistic regression models. The results of these analyses can be seen in Tables 2–7. While there are only six tables presenting the results of each regression analysis, there were seven regressions performed. The final regression is not presented as a table because there was only one statistically significant result for religious identity as the dependent variable. This result was that those who had Jewish mothers or fathers were statistically much more likely to report being Jewish than having no religion compared to those whose mothers or fathers had no religion.

Table 2 displays the results for the regression model with our five independent variables and self-rated religiosity as the dependent variable. As the results of this table show, those who attended religious services in their childhood were much more likely to be ‘very religious’ than non religious at the time of the survey compared to those who reported never attending religious services at the age of twelve. Similarly, higher (although not the highest) religious service attendance of the respondent’s mother predicted the same. However, while it was mother’s religious service attendance, it was father’s religious identity that proved predictive, where those whose fathers were Protestant or Catholic were much more likely to report being very religious later in life than not religious, compared to those with no religion. Mother’s religion showed no statistically significant predictive result for respondent’s religiosity. Additionally, while only the highest level of religious service attendance was predictive of being ‘very religious’, the top three levels of attendance frequency were predictive of moderate religiosity, and the top two levels also of slight religiosity. More moderate mother’s attendance and father’s religious identity (as Protestants or Catholics) were predictive of the respondent being moderately religious, while moderate father’s religious service attendance (along with the same results for father’s identity) were predictive of the respondent being slightly religious.

Table 3 displays the results for religious service attendance and the five independent influence variables. With 'never' attending religious services as the reference category, the results show that the highest levels of religious service attendance in childhood are most predictive of moderate attendance later in life, although higher levels in childhood are associated with higher levels of attendance later in life generally. The two variables that are most predictive of the highest levels of attendance among survey respondents were mother's moderate to high religious service attendance and father's religious identity as Protestants or Catholics (compared to no religion). Father's religious service attendance and Catholic identity are also predictive of respondents attending religious services 'almost every week'. Finally, those with Jewish mothers are most likely to attend services once a year or less.

Table 4 displays the results for the regression analysis of the predictive capacity of our five past influence variables have on the change in the respondent's belief in God over time. Compared to those who have never and continue to not believe in God, those who report childhood religious service attendance are much more likely to report always believing in God and continuing to do so, with high levels of father's religious service attendance and mother's catholic identity also predictive of this relationship to statistically significant levels. Elevated levels of childhood attendance at religious services, along with father's religious identification with either Protestantism, or especially with Islam, are much more likely to report believing both now and always than to have lost their believe in God (i.e. reporting that they do not now believe in God but used to do so). The strength of childhood religious service attendance again shows up as those who attended services as a child much more likely to report believing now and always than believing now and not before. Moderate mother's attendance predicts a similar relationship, while mother's religion being Islam also predicts believing now and always over believing now and not before, compared to no attendance or religion, respectively.

Table 5 reports the results of the multinomial regression analysis of the influence variables and the strength of religious affiliation that the respondent has with their religious identity. With those respondents who report as a very strong X (religious identity) as the reference category, the results show that those who attended religious services as a child every week or more are significantly much more likely to report very strong religious affiliation contemporarily, as well as those who had mothers with moderate religious service attendance and fathers who were Protestants or Catholics. Compared to those with very strong current religious affiliation, those who had moderate religious service attendance as a child, and those whose fathers were either Protestants or had an 'other' religion were more likely to have a somewhat or not very strong religious affiliation compared to no childhood attendance or paternal religious identity, respectively. However, those whose mothers were Catholic were more likely to report having a current religious affiliation that was somewhat or not very strong than to report one that is very strong, in comparison to those whose mother had no religion.

Finally, Tables 6 and 7 show regression analyses with the private religious practices of prayer and scripture reading (outside of religious services) as dependent variables. As the results in these tables show, higher childhood attendance at religious services and father's (Protestant) religious identification are the primary predictors of religious scripture reading and higher rates of prayer. The final statistically significant result shows that those whose mother had a Muslim religious identity are much less likely to read religious scriptures outside of religious services in adulthood, but much more likely to pray frequently if their father had a Muslim religious identity.

Table 2. Log odds ratios from regression analysis of current religiosity and past influence variables.

	Very Religious	Moderately Religious	Slightly Religious
Childhood rel. service attendance^b			
Every week or more	1.383**	1.439***	1.129**
2-3/mo. to nearly 1/week	.378	1.027*	1.382**
Several times/yr. to 1/mo.	.437	.996*	.698
Once a year or less	- .920	.263	.749
Never	---	---	---
Mother's attendance			
Every week or more	.665	.321	- .170
2-3/mo. to nearly 1/week	1.408*	.864	.574
Several times/yr. to 1/mo.	1.782**	.578	.708
1-2/yr. or less	.503	.545	.761
No mother present	- .154	16.255	15.045
Never	---	---	---
Father's attendance			
Every week or more	- .082	- .162	.321
2-3/mo. to nearly 1/week	- .726	.052	.089
Several times/yr. to 1/mo.	.297	.854	1.242**
1-2/yr. or less	.048	.260	.132
No mother present	- .816	- .027	.009
Never	---	---	---
Father's religion			
Protestant	2.544***	.976**	.755*
Catholic	2.366***	1.002 **	.980**
Jewish	1.151	- .502	1.180
Orthodox Christian	- .369	18.908	1.473
Muslim	.359	.261	18.230
Other	1.686	-- 1.563	.248
No religion	---	---	---
Mother's religion			
Protestant	- .708	.487	- .091
Catholic	-1.159	.528	.203
Jewish	-1.117	- .213	- 1.443
Orthodox Christian	17.405	- .903	- .934
Muslim	.219	1.324	-18.805
Other	.260	2.059	- .414
No religion	---	---	---
Nagekerke R ²	.261		

^aReference group='not religious'^bChildhood attendance at age 12

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

Table 3. Log odds ratios from regression analysis of current religious service attendance and past influence variables.

	Every week or more	Almost every week	Several x/yr. to 1/month	Once a year or less
Childhood rel. service attendance^b				
Every week or more	.952*	.919	1.853***	.893
2-3/mo. to nearly 1/week	.635	1.368*	1.524*	1.753***
Several times/yr. to 1/mo.	.781	1.428*	1.729**	1.469**
Once a year or less	- .855	- 1.765	.921	.791
Never	---	---	---	---
Mother's attendance				
Every week or more	.939*	- .685	.226	- .689
2-3/mo. to nearly 1/week	.108	- .412	.706	- .524
Several times/yr. to 1/mo.	1.883***	.245	1.571**	.434
1-2/yr. or less	.654	- 1.225	.487	- .012
No mother present	-17.404	-18.484	1.158	-17.904
Never	---	---	---	---
Father's attendance				
Every week or more	.017	- 1.351**	.015	.617
2-3/mo. to nearly 1/week	- .433	.912	.070	- .007
Several times/yr. to 1/mo.	- .814	.696	- .172	.057
1-2/yr. or less	- .036	.956	- .244	.700*
No mother present	.208	.116	.892	- .209
Never	---	---	---	---
Father's religion				
Protestant	1.304***	.578	.697	.470
Catholic	1.155**	1.059*	.712	.503
Jewish	.625	- .098	- .121	- .962
Orthodox Christian	-18.614	-15.349	-15.468	- 1.162
Muslim	15.941	- .410	16.192	- .231
Other	.415	.121	-13.529	- .345
No religion	---	---	---	---
Mother's religion				
Protestant	.502	.819	- .405	.281
Catholic	.157	.134	- .112	.533
Jewish	- .744	- .465	.256	2.215*
Orthodox Christian	18.439	.816	- .364	.973
Muslim	- 15.60	2.017	-15.381	- .482
Other	1.208	1.163	-13.822	.552
No religion	---	---	---	---
Nagekerke R ²	.288			

^aReference group='never'^bChildhood attendance at age 12

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

Table 4. Log odds ratios from regression analysis of change in the belief of God and past influence variables.

	Not now, not ever	Not now, but did	Believe now, not before
Childhood rel. service attendance^b			
Every week or more	- 2.476***	- 1.458**	- 2.535***
2-3/mo. to nearly 1/week	- 3.976***	- .841	- 1.516**
Several times/yr. to 1/mo.	- 2.301***	- .937	- 1.501**
Once a year or less	- 1.633**	- 1.646*	- 1.429**
Never	---	---	---
Mother's attendance			
Every week or more	- .361	.536	- .236
2-3/mo. to nearly 1/week	.666	.431	- .834
Several times/yr. to 1/mo.	- .079	- .079	- 1.617*
1-2/yr. or less	- 1.299	.966	- .328
No mother present	-13.173	-13.373	.579
Never	---	---	---
Father's attendance			
Every week or more	- 2.070**	.352	.137
2-3/mo. to nearly 1/week	- .951	- .148	- .029
Several times/yr. to 1/mo.	- 1.355	.385	.380
1-2/yr. or less	- .803	- .930	- .185
No mother present	- 1.015	- .751	- 1.437
Never	---	---	---
Father's religion			
Protestant	- .518	- 1.335**	.595
Catholic	- .214	- .521	.127
Jewish	-10.975	-25.648	-39.883
Orthodox Christian	- .742	15.281	.324
Muslim	-16.744	-17.068***	4.168
Other	- .726	-19.269	- 1.563
No religion	---	---	---
Mother's religion			
Protestant	- .618	- .240	- .753
Catholic	- 1.789*	- .892	- .755
Jewish	12.546	25.832	25.963
Orthodox Christian	-13.997	- 14.753	-15.523
Muslim	3.479	15.471	- 5.162*
Other	2.521	2.364	1.929
No religion	---	---	---
Nagekerke R ²	.311		

^a Reference group='believe now, always have'

^b Childhood attendance at age 12

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

Table 5. Log odds ratios from regression analysis of strength of religious affiliation and past influence variables.

	No religion	Somewhat/ not very strong
Childhood rel. service attendance^b		
Every week or more	- 1.374***	.055
2-3/mo. to nearly 1/week	- .899	.631
Several times/yr. to 1/mo.	- .292	1.113*
Once a year or less	.052	1.361**
Never	---	---
Mother's attendance		
Every week or more	- .101	- .206
2-3/mo. to nearly 1/week	- .428	- .029
Several times/yr. to 1/mo.	- .992*	- .756
1-2/yr. or less	- .629	- .154
No mother present	-14.789	1.944
Never	---	---
Father's attendance		
Every week or more	.133	- .240
2-3/mo. to nearly 1/week	.230	- .094
Several times/yr. to 1/mo.	.451	- .043
1-2/yr. or less	- .751	- .377
No mother present	- .345	- .549
Never	---	---
Father's religion		
Protestant	- 1.846***	- .844**
Catholic	- 1.360***	- .318
Jewish	- 1.508	.035
Orthodox Christian	- .791	15.116
Muslim	- .153	17.878
Other	- .756	- 2.267*
No religion	---	---
Mother's religion		
Protestant	- .719	.467
Catholic	- .707	.984*
Jewish	- .659	.359
Orthodox Christian	-18.314	-16.945
Muslim	- 1.945	-17.937
Other	- 1.727	1.005
No religion	---	---
Nagkerke R ²	.257	

^a Reference group=very strong religious affiliation^b Childhood attendance at age 12

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

Table 6. Log odds ratios from regression analysis of reading religious scriptures and past influence variables.

	Yes
Childhood rel. service attendance^b	
Every week or more	.817**
2-3/mo. to nearly 1/week	.303
Several times/yr. to 1/mo.	.584
Once a year or less	-.255
Never	---
Mother's attendance	
Every week or more	.323
2-3/mo. to nearly 1/week	.069
Several times/yr. to 1/mo.	.194
1-2/yr. or less	.338
No mother present	.063
Never	---
Father's attendance	
Every week or more	-.155
2-3/mo. to nearly 1/week	-.336
Several times/yr. to 1/mo.	-.156
1-2/yr. or less	-.028
No mother present	-.091
Never	---
Father's religion	
Protestant	.797**
Catholic	.479
Jewish	.257
Orthodox Christian	1.368
Muslim	19.020
Other	1.160
No religion	---
Mother's religion	
Protestant	.190
Catholic	-.266
Jewish	-.415
Orthodox Christian	18.360
Muslim	-16.427***
Other	-.945
No religion	---
Nagekerke R ²	.132

^aReference group=No^bChildhood attendance at age 12

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

Table 7. Log odds ratios from regression analysis of frequency of prayer and past influence variables.

	Frequently (several/wk)	Regularly (approx. 1/wk)	Infrequently (1/yr.-1/month)
Childhood rel. service attendance^b			
Every week or more	1.461***	2.253*	1.615**
2-3/mo. to nearly 1/week	.454	1.396	1.216*
Several times/yr. to 1/mo.	1.094*	2.936**	1.163
Once a year or less	- .061	.827	.858
Never	---	---	---
Mother's attendance			
Every week or more	- .240	- .170	- .774
2-3/mo. to nearly 1/week	.313	.308	- .081
Several times/yr. to 1/mo.	.098	- .103	.036
1-2/yr. or less	- .117	.735	.163
No mother present	1.388	- .851	- 1.075
Never	---	---	---
Father's attendance			
Every week or more	.355	.034	.315
2-3/mo. to nearly 1/week	.091	- .607	.028
Several times/yr. to 1/mo.	.019	- .139	.416
1-2/yr. or less	.388	- .603	.277
No mother present	.620	.316	- .761
Never	---	---	---
Father's religion			
Protestant	1.217***	1.367*	1.194*
Catholic	.299	.348	.601
Jewish	1.247	- 1.363	1.561
Orthodox Christian	- 1.899	2.483	- 3.113
Muslim	25.724***	7.946	.169
Other	.133	- 3.218	- 1.663
No religion	---	---	---
Mother's religion			
Protestant	.176	- .408	.297
Catholic	.888	1.409	1.061
Jewish	- 2.192	2.228	- .571
Orthodox Christian	2.152	- .154	- .215
Muslim	-24.367	- 8.300	.914
Other	1.577	5.659*	4.446
No religion	---	---	---
Nagkerke R ²	.213		

^aReference group=Never^bChildhood attendance at age 12

*p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001

5. Discussion and conclusions

I set out with the research of this paper to try and update understandings of the relationship, extent, and variability of parental and childhood religious influences on the religious identity, beliefs, and practices in adulthood. For this I used a prevalent and widely respected dataset for social science research, with a strong record of producing high quality research on religion in the United States. Using the only iteration of this dataset in a decade that reported variables of parental religious engagement, I hope to contribute these updated results to augment the corpus of studies into these relationships to add to the existing literature on the intergenerational transmission of religion in contemporary societies. From the results of our analyses, I can generally answer both hypotheses of

this paper regarding transmission in the affirmative and can see results and broad themes that confirm previous studies, problematize others, and add new knowledge to the existing empirical literature on religion and society.

First, while variable across our five aspects of religion, I find strong parental and childhood predictive influence on adult religiosity, religious service attendance, the trajectory of their believe in God, and the strength of their current religious affiliation. However, there was weak evidence for the intergenerational transmission of religious identity, except for those with Jewish parents. The three variables that show the most consistent predictive impact as to future engagement with religion generally are the religious service attendance of the respondent in childhood, the religious service attendance of the respondent's mother, and the religious identity of the respondent's father. In many ways this echoes the study of Francis (1993), which found that it was mothers' religious practice that was a more powerful predictor or practices of their children. However, the important impact of a father's religious identity (especially Protestant identity, but also others, such as Muslim in the case of prayer) may play an important role in supporting the religious service attendance and private religious practice of family members, perhaps even regardless of how frequently they attend religious services or attend with other family members. This may also echo findings of Voas and Storm (2012), who emphasize the importance to intergenerational religious transmission of two parents attending church when their children are young. McPhail (2019) likewise has argued for the decreased transmission effect of religious heterogamy among parents. Or it may be that differential effects occur, with sons being more influenced by the religiosity of their father (Gutierrez et al., 2014).

A second broad theme is that in line with prior research, I do not see any strong evidence of a type of 'backlash' to parental or childhood religious engagement, with a prominent exception of those whose mother was Muslim being significantly less likely to read scriptures in adulthood, perhaps exemplary of differential effects among both religions and parental identity, although more consistent results to this effect would be needed. But this is generally to say that there are few findings from the analysis of this paper that there is a negative correlation between parental religious influence and religious engagement later in adulthood. Indeed, if anything I see religious behavior in adulthood that very closely mirrors parental religious behavior. Therefore, I can confidently place the results of this research within the prior literature that emphasizes an intergenerational effect of religion rather than in those studies that find little evidence of this. For instance, the results of our analysis suggest that while personal religious service attendance in childhood is predictive of future attendance, that future attendance is less than in childhood and instead more closely mirrors parental attendance, especially mother's religious service attendance patterns from childhood. Therefore, even if the adult religious behavior (e.g. religious service attendance) is sometimes not as strong as it was when they were twelve, it is not necessarily significantly weaker than the prior generation. While it could be argued that this shows the incremental intergenerational decline of engagement with religion (e.g. Storm and Voas 2012), especially around father's religious service attendance and adult attendance, it also may also be more an effect of life course influence by which religion takes a more 'adult' place within the life of the child as they grow into adulthood and major life events happen (Hardie, Pearch, and Denton 2016). These findings also suggest the reflection of a type of 'religious residue' in debates of religious decline in traditionally Christian countries, whereby those who were raised in a religious household but have since left that religion, still exhibit greater measures of religiosity than those who grew up with no religion (Beider, 2023).

A final broad theme of the results of this paper is that parental and childhood engagement with religion is much more predictive of religious engagement and attitudes later in life than they are of religious identification later in life, echoing the strong conclusions to this effect by Clements and Bullivant (2022), and again highlighting a type of religious residue (Beider, 2023) or perhaps a type of 'chain of memory' (Hervieu-Léger). Indeed, not even parental religious identification was predictive of adulthood identification, except for Jewish respondents. It is also true that even among independent variables of our analysis, while father's religious identity showed predictive results, broadly parental religious identification was less predictive than religious service attendance in understanding adult religious belief and engagement, although there were a couple of examples of

strong predictive relationships for those with Muslim or Jewish parents. Ultimately, however, it is also the case that this highlights one of the primary limitations of this paper. The subcategories for religious identification were not populated enough to expect robust results from a regression analysis and may therefore be more of a function of this limitation in the data for religions that are not Protestants, Catholics, or those with no religion than it is anything else. This is especially a consideration given prior findings of strong intergenerational transmission among religious minority groups and immigrant populations (e.g. Jacob and Kalter 2013).

In conclusion, I aimed in this research to add to the existing research on intergenerational transmission of religion through an investigation of the relationship of childhood and parental religious influences on contemporary religious identity, beliefs, and practices of their adult children who responded to the 2018 GSS. Through multiple regression analyses of this quality dataset of religion in the United States, the findings of our research confirm and highlight the significant influential predictive relationship between childhood and parental religious identity and engagement on their adult children. Amongst the most powerful predictors of this transmission are the religious identity of the respondent’s father, the religious service attendance of their mother, and their own religious service attendance as a child. While there was some lessened intensity of religious engagement in adulthood, respondent’s religious behaviors largely mirrored parental influence. However, amongst the variables studied, parental religious identity was the least predictive. These results show that while highly predictive, the predictive mechanisms of intergenerational religious transmission are variable and depend the type of religious engagement and which parent is associated with that engagement.

Appendix

Table A1. Basic demographic information from the 2018 GSS compared to the US Census Bureau’s 2018 estimates for basic demographic information.

	US Census (2018 estimates 18+)	Relative frequency (GSS)
Age		
18-24	13.5%	11.8%
25-34	18.0%	19.0%
35-49	24.6%	25.8%
50-64	25.2%	24.9%
65+	15.8%	18.3%
Sex		
Male	48.4%	45.5%
Female	51.6%	54.5%
Race		
Other	24.6%	12.8%
Black	12.2%	14.8%
White	63.2%	72.4%

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