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Book Review

Christel Gärtner, Linda Hennig & Olaf Müller (eds): *Families and Religion: Dynamics of Transmission across Generations.* Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2025, 425 pp.

Families and Religion: Dynamics of Transmission across Generations is an anthology focusing on the generational transmission of religion in Canada, Finland, Germany, Hungary, and Italy. The selected countries represent Western and post-Communist countries with either a Catholic or Protestant Christian majority, or mixed as in Canada and Germany. The editorial team of Christel Gärtner, Linda Hennig, and Olaf Müller is based at the University of Münster in Germany. The other main national contributors are established scholars in the sociology of religion. The book is based on a research project funded by the John Templeton Foundation.

The editors' introduction explains the study's point of departure: 'We rely on the widely shared interpretation that this religious change can be understood primarily as a process of generational replacement, i.e. that over time less religious generations are replacing their more religious predecessors' (p. 11). The book's main aim is 'to investigate how, when exactly, and under what circumstances subsequent generations become less or differently religious' (p. 11). Families are selected as a window onto the generational replacement thesis, as the contributors investigate 'the claim that religious decline is due mainly to the changing conditions and influences that subsequent generations experience in childhood, and particularly in adolescence' (p. 11). The research focus is on religious transmission, changes of meanings and practices, and factors and mechanisms (p. 12).

After an overview of previous research and related findings the introduction explains the book's shared theoretical and methodological basis. Generations are the main theoretical starting point and are understood in two different ways: as family generations (grandparents, parents, children); and historical generations (birth cohorts). These are then related to socialization theories of growing up in 'a specific historical-political community' (p. 21). This is motivated by the statement that 'while in the phase of childhood it is primarily the family that influences religious beliefs and practices, in the phase of adolescence it is the societal and cultural context' (p. 21). The entire volume follows a joint methodology consisting of nationally representative surveys and generational family interviews. In the German case data collection was planned to differentiate the East (GDR) and West (FRG) German experiences, as the country was divided after the Second World War until 1990.

The core of the book is five national chapters that follow a similar

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structure, starting with a historical background, followed by survey and interview analysis and discussion. The chapter on Germany is authored by Christel Gärtner, Linda Hennig, and Olaf Müller. Religious socialization was challenging for families in the GDR, and the data show clearly that the East became increasingly secular. This was probably also related to that region's mainly Protestant Christian history. The German case underlines the significance of state policies on religion, so different are the religious developments between the Communist East and the Liberal Democratic West.

The Italian team consists of Roberta Ricucci, Ferruccio Biolcati Rinaldi, Luca Bossi, Marcello Cabria, Renzo Carriero, and Francesco Molteni. Italian society has undergone significant religious changes in recent decades, but the majority Catholic Church still has a significant if eroding position in society. Weekly attendance and other basic indicators of religiosity have declined, especially among younger generations. Ricucci et al. divide Italians into three categories: practising Catholics; cultural Catholics; and nonreligious. The chapter's basic message is clear: 'The power of religious institutions seems to be waning when it comes to forging new generations of Catholics' (p. 131).

Peter Beyer and Jacob Legault-Leclair introduce the Canadian perspective. The overall religious situation in Canada differs somewhat between provinces, especially along the Anglo Protestant – French Catholic dividing line. Canada has not had an established church since the mid-nineteenth century. It is also a country of historical and contemporary immigration, with increasing religious diversity. The authors note a feature also taken up in several of the book's other chapters, 'that not all religions or subdivisions of religions have been affected to the same degree by this [downward] trend [in religiosity]' (p. 138). While the general picture of religious change is somewhat similar across many countries, there are both tradition-specific and country-specific variations to this of which we should be aware. Islam and Catholicism appear to resist secularization more effectively.

The Hungarian chapter is written by Gergely Rosta, Zsuzsanna Szvetelszky, and Virág Sövegjártó. Hungary is a post-communist country that had a slightly more relaxed relationship with religion than the GDR. It is also somewhat more religious today than the former GDR, perhaps also because of its Catholic history. The role of grandparents was significant: the state promoted an anti-religious agenda to working parents.

The Finnish chapter is by Kati Tervo-Niemelä, Jenni Spännäri, Laura Kallatsa, and Heidi Toivanen. Finland is a Protestant (Lutheran) Christian majority society where the church has become less important, though church membership remains more than 60 per cent. Religious socialization is less common than previously, and church member-

ship is significantly lower among younger generations. The findings also show that both self-defined religiosity and spirituality have declined. Unlike in many countries the decline is stronger among women than men, though women are still more religious/spiritual.

The country analyses are brought together in comparative chapters focusing respectively on the quantitative and qualitative data. The study's main results support the generational replacement theory, in which successive generations are less religious, but differences between religious traditions are observed. Religious socialization in the family is now less common, and the general societal climate does not support it, though in this respect the countries differ slightly. The authors also note that the transmission process is reflexive: parents consider what to transmit or not, and with which specific content. Transmission is thus also a reflexive process of the transformation of beliefs and values. This aspect deserves further study.

Despite its merits, the book could have opened up its key concepts of 'family' and 'generation' better. The family is more or less taken for granted as a biological, conjugal, and three-generational succession. The book does not really discuss single parents, divorcees, blended families, parenting at a distance, and so on, all of which are increasingly common in today's world. Although some chapters point to different families, they do not reflect extensively on the differences. More discussion of various understandings and types of family, as well as in relation to the vast anthropological and other literature on the topic, would also have made the book a better resource for researchers focusing on religion and family in non-Western societies.

Generation, the other key term, is defined, but its meaning includes only a biological or genealogical, as well as a Mannheimian historical, understanding of generations, the latter of which is basically applied as birth cohorts. While these are obviously essential, I missed reflections on the notion of generation as understood in the migration studies literature. Migration studies understand generations in relation to parents and their descendants' country of birth as referring to the central socialization context of respective generations, including age at migration. These views can also be related to country-internal migration (there are few migrant families in the qualitative samples), which has also been an important factor in Western societies in the last two centuries.

I had the opportunity to be the discussant in an author-meets-critics session on *Families and Religion* at the 38th biennial conference of the International Society for the Sociology of Religion in Kaunas in Lithuania in July 2025. At that session I raised this critique, which the authors considered valid. Family life is becoming increasingly complex in mobile societies with blended families, so a more sensitive approach to basic

categorizations is probably required in future studies of the generational perspective on religious socialization in families.

Families and Religion: Dynamics of Transmission across Generations is a coherent and well-written anthology. It is rich in data, and its comparative approach allows its authors both to discuss country-specific developments and dwell on general observations of religious transmission over more than half a century. The volume is a good addition to the existing literature on families and religion and will be an inspiration for others in its results and methodological setup. Researchers focusing on religious transmission will find this book of great value, as will many others working on religious change in Western societies.

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