

Religious Parenting—Questions for Reflection and Discussion

Religious Parenting uncovers how American adults think about one of the most important tasks of their entire lives: raising their children, including passing on their beliefs and values to their children. The following questions are intended to inspire critical reflection on the perspectives and strategies described by parents in the book, as well as to draw out implications.

– Michael Rotolo

Introduction

- Page 5-6 says, “The single, most powerful causal influence on the religious lives of American teenagers and young adults is the religious lives of their parents. Not their peers, not the media, not their youth group leaders or clergy, not their religious school teachers. Myriad studies show that, beyond a doubt, the parents of Americans play *the* leading role in shaping the character of their religious and spiritual lives, even well after they leave home and often for the rest of their lives.” What does this finding indicate about when and how people acquire their religious views and values? If parents play the primary role, how should religious Americans structure (or restructure) their organizations for effective transmission of religious faith and values?
- Page 8 claims that Americans of all backgrounds who were interviewed for this book expressed nearly identical views on transmitting their faith and values to their children. Does this seem expected or surprising? What might this suggest about the ability of different religious denominations to convey their unique, tradition-specific teachings?

Chapter 1

- The paragraph spanning pages 15 and 16 gives an overview of how American adults understand life’s purpose. Does this sound like how you understand life’s purpose? Are there items listed that you think should not matter, or items that you think should be added? Do you think this description of life’s purpose is compatible with what different religions teach about life’s purpose? Parents heavily emphasize personal happiness as part of life’s purpose—how do you think happiness should fit into life’s purpose?
- American parents indicate that they think good lives are primarily about achieving a certain quality of life in this world, not the afterlife (see the section on page 26). Do you think this is consistent or divergent with religious teachings? Do you think religious Americans shared this same belief 50 years ago? Do you think this belief has significant consequences for how Americans live?

Chapter 2

- Most religious Americans understand religion as normal, valuable, and meaningful, with many positive benefits. Does this portrait of religion seem compatible with how broader society views religion? Do you think this fits with how religion is portrayed in the media?
- Page 76 and the remainder of the chapter describe how parents understand the truth of their religion and other religions. Their views are more pluralistic and accepting than exclusive, which parallels how many studies have described shifts in American worldviews over the past several decades. What are the positive and negative consequences of more relativistic views about religious truth?
- Parents suggest that it is acceptable to “pick and choose” religious beliefs based on “whatever seems right” to you. No one has to accept the “whole package” of a religion.

Do you think this belief is justifiable? If everyone thought this way, what kinds of consequences would you expect for religions?

Chapter 3

- Parents describe their children as having a “best self” that must be cultivated and actualized through growth and experience. What do you think a “best self” consists of, and how should it be cultivated? How are your views on this matter similar or different to those expressed by parents in this chapter?
- The section titled, “The Task of Parenting” (pages 118-138), describes American parents’ struggle to not be too lax or overbearing as a parent. Parents worry about accidentally “forcing” beliefs on their children, which would contradict their children freely choosing their views and could potentially trigger rebellion. How should parents think about transmitting their beliefs and values with regard to the balance of not being too lax or overbearing? Can children ever really “freely choose” their beliefs without any type of external influences or “force?” Is parents’ fear of triggering rebellion a valid concern?
- The parents interviewed express a strong desire for family solidarity and closeness, often to the exclusion of other things, like religion. What do you think about the prioritization of values as described in “The Priority of Family Solidarity” (pages 142-155)?

Chapter 4

- Parents describe the importance of giving their children a strong “foundation” or “grounding,” which they can always “come back to.” What do you think this foundation should consist of? Do you think providing a foundation is an effective way to transmit faith and values?
- The cultural model beginning on page 168 indicates that parents see religious congregations as secondary to their own religious teaching. Often, parents have fairly low expectations for congregations, viewing them primarily as nice and hopefully fun social settings for their children. And yet, billions of dollars are invested in religious congregations each year. How should we think about this divergence? Why might people invest so much in religious congregations, but expect so little? What kinds of changes might this discrepancy call for?
- The process by which most parents approach religious transmission to their children, described on page 179, is largely gradual, intuitive, and practice-centered. Children watch and absorb religious knowledge from their parents, as opposed to being taught explicitly or “preached at.” Is this approach compatible with what religions teach? Do you think it is effective? If religion is passed on this way, what might this say about the overall structuring of religion, the money invested into congregations, and the expectations of religious leaders? Do these views incite any necessary changes in perspective, allocation of resources, or overall organization?

Conclusion

- Parents insist on giving their children “good values”—a vague term, which usually refers to their own personal standards and allegiances. These “values” are not particularly religious. What might it mean that parents prioritize these “values” over distinctly religious teachings? Do you think there is genuine content to these “values?”
- Having read this book, what is your overall assessment of Americans’ views of religion?