INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF CONSERVATIVE RELIGION AND

ATTITUDES

Jesse Smith

The Pennsylvania State University
211 Oswald Tower
University Park, PA, 16802, USA
(619) 713-4920
jessesmith@psu.edu

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Abstract

Past research finds a strong relationship between parent and child religiosity. However, previous studies have not explored how this relationship varies by parental religious ideology. Using data from Wave I and Wave IV of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), I examine (a) how transmission of religiosity from parents to their young adult children is moderated by parental religious conservatism, (b) how parental religious conservatism is related to young adults' religious conservative attitudes, and (c) how family religious practice mediates these relationships. I find that religious transmission between generations is strengthened by parental religious conservatism, and this effect is partly explained by higher levels of family religious practice in these households during adolescence. I further find that parental religious conservatism has a positive relationship with young adult religious conservative attitudes at Wave IV. This relationship is partially mediated by various elements of family religious practice during adolescence.

INTRODUCTION

A substantial body of research confirms a high degree of continuity between the religious beliefs and attitudes of parents and those of their adult children, indicative of intergenerational transmission (Bengtson 2017; Myers 1996).   The success of this transmission, however, varies according to a number of factors, including the beliefs or attitudes in question and features of the particular age cohorts involved (Acock and Bengtson 1978). For the millenial generation, transmission is complicated by such trends as declining religious attendance and sociocultural polarization (Voas and Chaves 2016; DellaPosta, Shi, and Macy 2017). Compared to their elders, millennials are both more liberal and less religious, and indeed, these trends reinforce one another as liberalism becomes increasingly associated with secularism (and conversely, religion with conservatism) (Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014; Campbell, Layman, Green, and Suyaktomo 2018; Putnam and Campbell 2010).

Are these developments interfering with the process of transmission of religious beliefs and attitudes for this generation? If so, who is most affected? On the one hand, it is possible that cohort trends will most disrupt the parent-child continuity of religious conservatism, defined here as an orientation which emphasizes reliance on tradition, moral absolutes, and a belief in transcendent authority (Hunter 1991). Millennials from religious conservative backgrounds may experience a corrosive tension between the beliefs of their parents and those of their peers which undermines transmission, while those from religiously liberal families encounter no such barriers. On the other hand, it is possible that religious conservative background may contribute to robust belief structures, religiously-based family identities, or in-group tendencies which serve as protective factors against antithetical cohort trends of religious decline, thus strengthening

transmission, while those from religiously liberal families are afforded no such protections. In the former case, continuity of religious conservatism should be especially weak, while in the latter case, it should be strong.

The present study has two purposes. Using longitudinal data from Waves I and IV of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), I first test the moderating effect of parental religious conservatism on the relationship between religiosity of parents and that of their young adult children. In doing so, I answer the question of whether religious continuity is stronger in religiously conservative or liberal families. Second, I examine the strength of transmission of religious conservative *attitudes*, as distinct from religiosity itself. Specifically, I test the effects of parental religious conservatism on three clusters of young adult religious attitudes: (1) favorability toward religion, (2) belief in moral absolutism, and (3) acceptance of God as an ultimate moral authority. I further explore the mediating effects of family religious life during adolescence on transmission of these beliefs and attitudes.

Results indicate a positive interaction between parental religious conservatism and importance of faith in predicting later young adult religiosity. This suggests religiosity transmits more strongly within religiously conservative than liberal families, even in the millennial generation. I further find a robust positive relationship between parental religious conservatism and all three attitude measures, indicating transmission of religious conservative beliefs as well as behaviors. Effects are mediated partially by such family efforts as joint worship service attendance, prayer, enrollment of youth in religious school, and discussion of religious topics in the home. These

findings lend support to the theory that features of religious conservatism within families serve as buffers against cohort trends of religious decline.

BACKGROUND

Past studies find significant continuity of religious belief and practice between parents and their adult children (Min, Silverstein, and Gruenewald 2017; Smith and Snell 2009). The strength of this continuity depends in part on both supportive family dynamics and features of particular religious traditions.

Children who are closer to their parents are more likely to adopt similar religious beliefs (Bengtson 2017; Armet 2009). Family closeness has consistently been identified as a strong predictor of religious transmission, and is further supported when parents hold similar religious beliefs to one another (Hoge, Petrillo, and Smith 1982; Myers 1996). Parents who "practice what they preach" in the sense of maintaining consistency between their professed religious beliefs and observed behaviors also exert a stronger influence on the religious lives of their children (Bader, Desmond, Udry, Bearman, and Harris 2006). Religious transmission is strengthened by use of authoritative parenting styles and active family religious practice (Dudley and Wisbey 2000; Hayes and Pittelkow 1993). Families who have not experienced divorce or excessive marital conflict see higher religious continuity (Bengtson 2017). Together, these findings indicate the importance of relational cohesiveness and religious consistency within the family in promoting transmission, in a basic process of socialization. Children who identify more strongly with their parents, and who share religious practice and belief with them, are more likely to keep the same traditions in adulthood.

Some religious traditions are more successful at maintaining intergenerational continuity than others. Conservative Protestants, Black Protestants, and Mormons report especially high rates of religious similarity to their parents, while Mainline Protestants and Catholics see greater decline across generations (Bengtson 2017; Smith and Snell 2009). Youth from "high-tension" religious backgrounds (those with more strict religious beliefs and higher demands on members) are more likely to maintain the religious identity with which they were raised than those from "lower-tension" traditions (Armet 2009). Similarly, Baby Boomers raised in conservative traditions maintained higher religiosity than other groups during the late 20th century when overall religious involvement began to decline (Sherkat 1998). Various studies of religious or attitude transmission find high parent-child similarity of conservative religious beliefs as compared to other items (Dudley and Dudley 1986; Bengtson, Copen, Putney, and Silverstein 2009; Min et al. 2017). Families with more traditional gender roles (i.e. male as the breadwinner and head of household) have also shown higher degrees of religious transmission (Myers 1996). In short, conservative forms of religion see relatively high rates of continuity across generations.

This successful transmission can be accounted for in various ways. It may, in part, simply be a function of higher religiosity among these conservative religious groups (Pew Research Center 2018). Bengtson (2017) suggests that religious traditions with a "quasi-ethnic" component which hold meanings for individuals across multiple life domains (transcendent belief, family history, peer group, community life, daily practice) foster greater, and longer-lasting, devotion in their adherents. In addition, traditions that provide intentional family support also promote stronger religious transmission. The Latter-Day Saint practice of "family home evening," the

provision by many Evangelical clergy of marital counseling, or congregational efforts to host family-friendly social events are examples of this (Edgell 2006). Some theorists suggest that "strict churches are strong" because they demand more from, and thus are able to offer more to, their adherents, in the form of social, spiritual, or material goods (Iannoccone 1994; Stark and Finke 2000). Subcultural identity theory explains the continuity of conservative religious belief in terms of the sense of identity engendered by demarcating clear in-group boundaries (Smith 1998). These accounts are largely complementary, and offer plausible interpretation of the strength of conservative religion.

The phenomenon of family transmission should not be overstated, however. Past literature reveals an enduring tension between continuity and change between generations, and many scholars find the latter to comprise the larger part of the story. Although many studies find a relationship between parent and child religious beliefs or other attitudes, the effect size is often modest and does not hold across items. For example, Glass, Bengtson, and Dunham (1986) find that in contrast to religious or political orientation, gender attitudes did *not* transmit strongly from parents to children, and indeed, children may have influenced their parents more than the other way around. Hoge et al. (1982) report that children are similar to parents in political views but depart from them in areas such as sexual attitudes, religious devotionalism, or opinions on integration of schools. At the level of underlying attitudes, children are found to be both more tolerant of different identities and lifestyles and more individualistic than their parents (Smith and Snell 2009; Bengtson 1975). Parental influence on children is powerful but also challenged on many fronts.

RELIGIOUS TRANSMISSION AMONG MILLENNIALS

Where intergenerational continuity is lacking, this may largely be explained by cohort effects. Children are shaped not only by their parents, but by the surrounding culture, opportunity structure, and historical context in which they form their belief systems. These influences may explain, for example, a departure from parental attitudes on issues of race or sexuality among children born after the Sexual Revolution and Civil Rights eras, greater acceptance of alternative sexual identities among those raised in a cultural milieu which values LGBT rights, or openness to socialist ideas for those with no memory of the Cold War (Putnam 2000; Hoge et al. 1982; YouGov 2017). The process of religious or attitude transmission is inevitably altered, and potentially undermined, by these cohort trends.

Millennials, in particular, have experienced a variety of cultural and social changes which may influence levels of religious similarity to their parents. Religiosity, by most measures, has declined over the past several decades, with fewer maintaining strong religious practice while more people openly identify as nonreligious ("none") (Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014). Social pressure to maintain religiosity may have thus declined or, in some settings, even reversed, reducing barriers to disaffiliation for those inclined to do so (Scheitle and Ecklund 2018). Increased levels of higher education result in wider exposure to alternative belief systems, greater personal autonomy, and wider geographic distance from parents among millennials, all of which may serve to reduce religious continuity over time (Schwadel 2017; Sherkat 1991). Ready access to modern technology and social media may have similar effects. The 21st century has seen an increasing association between religiosity and Republican politics (and conversely, between secularism and Democratic politics) which may serve to drive millennials, who are

disproportionately liberal, away from the religion of past generations (Putnam and Campbell 2010; Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014; Campbell et al. 2018). More than their elders, millennials exhibit a devotion to a *laissez-faire* tolerance that, for many, precludes both religious exclusivism and proselytization, which have historically represented important components of many religious traditions (Smith and Snell 2009). In short, intergenerational religious transmission may have fewer supports and more barriers for millennials today than in generations past.

Is continuity of religious conservatism especially vulnerable to these developments, or resistant against them? While more liberal or moderate brands of religious belief present less contrast to the views prevalent among millennials, conservative religion is characterized by moral absolutism, religious exclusivism, and adherence to traditional as opposed to modern social norms, all of which are antithetical to the larger cohort trends. It might be expected that religious conservatism would encounter greater resistance in this age group, and thus see greater decline. Alternatively, certain features of conservative religion might serve as protective factors *against* decline. A sense of moral absolutism and reliance on tradition may translate to resistance to modern social pressures. The association between religion and politics, which may drive liberal millennials to become more secular, may conversely prompt conservative millennials, fewer in number though they are, to become more religious (Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014). At the family level, religiously conservative parents may place a higher value on religious traditions within the family, and thus *social* pressure from the wider culture of the millennial cohort may be counteracted by *family* pressure which promotes religious continuity. Past literature, which finds on the one hand that millennials are more liberal and less religious than their elders, and on the

other that conservative churches maintain the greatest vitality by most objective measures, could

be interpreted as to lend support to either view (Putnam and Campbell 2010; Armet 2009;

Iannaccone 1994).

Although other studies have examined the trends in religious belief, affiliation, and practice

between different groups with cross-sectional data, little research to date has examined the

differences in religious transmission between religiously conservative and liberal families

longitudinally. In addition, recent studies have focused more on continuity of religious

identification and less on that of beliefs and attitudes. In this study I address these gaps by using

panel data to test a) the moderating effect of parental religious conservatism on intergenerational

transmission of religiosity, and b) the effects of parental religious conservatism on young adult

moral and religious attitudes. I proceed to estimate the mediating effects of family religious

practice during adolescence on young adult religious and attitudinal outcomes.

DATA AND METHODS

The data used for this study come from Waves I and IV the National Study of Youth and

Religion (NSYR). This is a nationally-representative panel study following respondents from

adolescence to emerging adulthood, collecting information on religious and spiritual formation,

moral attitudes, peer networks and family relationships, among other social factors. At Wave I

(2003), 3,370 youth (ages 13-17) and one resident parent figure (mother if available, father if

not, grandparent in 69 cases) were surveyed using random-digit-dial telephone interviews. The

original youth respondents were re-interviewed at Wave II (2005) and Wave III (2007-2008).

Wave IV of data was collected in 2013, when most respondents were between 23 and 28 years

old, using internet survey for some respondents and telephone interview for others. Due to attrition, the sample size for the final wave was 2,144. After excluding 749 cases where parents did not provide an interpretable response for the item on religious conservatism, 61 cases from the Jewish oversample, and 32 cases with missing data on other variables, the final analytic sample size is 1,302. (Rationale for excluded cases will be discussed in greater detail below.) See Smith and Denton (2003) for more information on the NSYR.

Dependent Variables

To measure young adult religiosity at Wave IV, I create a standardized scale developed from four different items regarding belief in God, frequency of worship service attendance, self-reported importance of religious faith in daily life, and frequency of personal prayer (α=.87). In the first item, respondents were asked simply, "Do you believe in God?" and offered three responses, coded as follows: (1) no, (2) unsure, and (3) yes. Frequency of worship service attendance is measured in seven categories, from "Never" to "More than once a week." To measure importance of faith, respondents were asked, "How important or unimportant is faith in shaping your daily life?" with five available responses ranging from "Not at all" to "Extremely important." Frequency of prayer is measured in seven categories, from "Never" to "Many times a day." These measures were selected as they are specific enough to capture distinct and important aspects of religiosity, and general enough to apply to a variety of different religious traditions.

Favorability toward religion is measured using a standardized scale developed from the inverse of three items indicating negative evaluation of religion (α =.73). Participants were asked to

respond to the following statements: "Organized religion is usually a big turn-off for me," "Too many religious people in this country these days are negative, angry, and judgmental," and "Most mainstream religion is irrelevant to the needs and concerns of most people my age." Available responses for each item consisted of 5-category Likert scales, coded (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) don't know, (4) disagree, and (5) strongly disagree. Because higher scores indicate *disagreement* with the statements, reflecting rejection of these views, this scale is used to measure favorable attitudes toward religion.

Moral absolutism is measured using a standardized scale developed from five items which assess attitudes about moral relativity ($\alpha = .80$). Respondents were asked to indicate level of agreement with the following statements: "Morals are relative, that there are no definite rights and wrongs for everybody," "The world is always changing and we should adjust our views of what is morally right and wrong to reflect those changes," "Moral standards should be seen as individualistic: what one person considers to be moral may be judged as immoral by another person," "Questions of what is ethical for everyone can never be resolved because what is moral or immoral is up to the individual to decide," and "Moral standards are simply personal rules that indicate how a person should behave, and should not be used when making judgments of others." For the first two items, responses consisted of 5-category Likert scales as described above, while the last three used 7-category Likert scales. As with attitude toward religion, items were coded so that higher scores indicate disagreement with the statements, and thus reflect a rejection of moral relativism, i.e. moral absolutism.

Finally, belief in transcendent authority is measured using a standardized scale drawn from two 7-category Likert-scale items: "Right and wrong should be based on God's law," and "American children should be raised to believe in God" (α =.87). While the majority of respondents report *belief* in God, this scale reflects a belief in the *moral primacy* of God. Agreement with these statements indicates belief that a) God's law can be known, presumably through religious teaching, and b) all Americans from childhood should be oriented to this law. Such belief is framed in these statements as normative rather than subjective, and indicates support for transcendent authority as a social foundation, a view reflecting religious conservatism.

Independent Variables

Key predictors

The first primary independent variable in this analysis is parental religious conservatism. At Wave I, parents were asked, "When it comes to your religious beliefs, compared to other religious Americans, do you usually think of yourself as…" Available responses were (1) very liberal, (2) liberal, (3) moderate, (4) conservative, (5) very conservative, and (6) "Haven't thought much about this." The modal category for this item was (6), consisting of about 30% of parents of respondents from the Wave IV sample. Because religious conservatism is treated as a continuous predictor, and parents who responded (6) are not interpretable on a scale, these respondents were excluded from the analysis. This means the analytic sample in this study reflects only the section of the population who identify as part of a liberal-to-conservative spectrum. Additional analyses not shown here reveal those parents who provided response (6) to be less religious in terms of both worship attendance and strength of belief, less educated, to have lower incomes, and to be less likely to be white than those who responded between (1) and

(5). This is consistent with research finding that while a large segment of Americans do not view themselves as part of an ideological spectrum, those who do are likely to belong to higher-SES groups (Fiorina 2005; Abramowitz and Saunders 2008).

By using a direct measure of self-reported religious conservatism, I avoid some of the shortcomings of efforts to assess this construct in other studies using alternative items. Many past studies have equated religious conservatism to affiliation with "Conservative Protestant" denominations. Others have used specific theological beliefs as a proxy for religious conservatism, such as belief in Biblical literalism or rejection of evolution. These measures tie religious conservatism explicitly to denomination, either via affiliation or belief content. Yet, as understood here to encapsulate a variety of moral attitudes, there is no reason the concept of religious conservatism should be limited by faith tradition. And indeed, the responses in the NSYR data do not support such an equivalence. In the present analytic sample, nearly 20% of those parents labeled "Conservative Protestant" according to the widely-used RELTRAD categories self-identify as religiously liberal, while over 25% of those classified "Mainline Protestant," a group oft-regarded liberal, identify as religiously conservative. Meanwhile, Catholic parents divide very nearly into thirds between self-identified liberals, moderates, and conservatives. Use of direct self-reported religious conservatism allows me to capture the variation both within and between denominations in a way most previous research has not done.

As additional key variables, I employ two measures of parent religiosity in this analysis. The first is frequency of parental worship service attendance, a 5-category item ranging from "Never" to "Once a week or more." The second is an item asking parents, "How important is your

religious faith in guiding your own day-to-day living?" There are six available responses

ranging from "Not at all important" to "Extremely important." Past research consistently finds

higher parent religiosity predicts higher child religiosity. By including both of these items in the

analysis with religious conservatism, I am able to identify the independent effect of each, and

compare how different aspects of parent religiosity affect different aspects of young adult

religious and moral attitudes.

Mediating variables

I explore a variety of possible mediators between parental religious conservatism, religiosity, and

respondent Wave IV outcomes, which focus on family and religious life at Wave I as reported by

youth. As parent closeness has consistently been found to promote religious transmission, I

include a variable indicating the respondent's level of closeness to the surveyed parent. This

items has six categories ranging from "Not close at all" to "Extremely close." To measure family

religious agreement, I include two dichotomous variables, one indicating whether or not the

respondent's resident parents practice the same religion, and the other indicating whether or not

the respondent and at least one parent attend services at the same congregation. As family

structure has been found to influence religious transmission, I include a dichotomous variable

indicating whether the respondent's biological parents were married at Wave I. In considering

the various pathways in family life by which religious belief might be transmitted, I include

additional dichotomous variables indicating whether or not the respondent is enrolled in a

religious school, whether the family says grace before meals, whether they pray together *outside*

of grace before meals or at religious services, and whether or not the respondent practices a

weekly day of rest on a sabbath. This last item is asked of the respondent individually, but is

likely to characterize family rather than merely individual religious practice. I further include the following item: "How often, if ever, does your family talk about God, the Scriptures, prayer, or other religious or spiritual things together?" Responses consist of six categories ranging from "Never" to "Every day." A categorical variable of parental religious tradition, using the RELTRAD categories, is included in the analysis to control for the effects of denomination on Wave IV outcomes (Steensland et al. 2000). The following categories are included in the analysis: Conservative Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Black Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Mormon LDS, and Other.

Although many of these items are conceptually closely related, and some correlations are moderately high (between .5 and .6), post-estimation tests reveal that the variance inflation factor for each mediating variable is below 2.5, indicating that multicollinearity is not a concern (Allison 1998).

Demographic controls

Several demographic controls are included as well. Background SES is measured as highest level of parental education at Wave I (in five categories from "less than high school" to "graduate degree"). Respondent controls include race (white, black, Hispanic, and other), age, and Wave IV attainment of a bachelor's degree. I also examine the effects of respondent marital status and number of children. As there is research to indicate these latter factors may have an independent effect on religiosity, I view them as rival explanations for Wave IV outcomes (Wilson and Sherkat 1994; Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, and Waite 1995). See Table 1 for descriptive statistics for all variables.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Measure	Mean/Proportion	Std. Dev.	Range
Wave IV outcomes			
Religiosity	.00	1	-1.81 – 1.53
Favorability toward religion	.00	1	-1.94 – 2.10
Moral absolutism	.00	1	-2.01 – 2.26
Belief in transcendent authority	.00	1	-1.74 – 1.38
Wave I predictors			
Parental worship attendance	3.55	1.82	0 – 5
Parental importance of faith	5.18	1.14	1 – 6
Parental religious conservatism	3.14	1.12	1 – 5
Parent-child closeness	5.01	.82	1 – 6
Parents married	.64	-	0 – 1
Parents' same religion	.62	-	0 – 1
Parent-teen shared worship	.78	-	0 – 1
Teen religious schooling	.10	-	0 – 1
Observe sabbath	.35	-	0 – 1
Family prays together	.46	-	0 – 1
Family says grace before meals	.57	-	0 – 1
Frequency of family religious discussion	3.46	1.72	1 – 6
Wave I Parent religious tradition			
Conservative Protestant	.37	-	0 – 1
Mainline Protestant	.19	-	0 – 1
Black Protestant	.07	-	0 – 1
Catholic	.24	-	0 – 1
Jewish	.03	-	0 – 1
Latter-Day Saint (Mormon)	.04	-	0 – 1
Other/no religion	.06	-	0 – 1
Parent education			
Less than high school	.02	-	0 – 1
High school	.12	-	0 – 1
Some college	.32	-	0 – 1
Bachelor's degree	.29	-	0 – 1
Advanced degree	.25	-	0 – 1
Wave IV – respondent			
Female	.55	-	0 – 1
Age	25.5	1.48	20 – 32
White	.76	-	0 – 1
Black	.10	-	0 – 1
Hispanic	.08	-	0 – 1
Other	.06	-	0 – 1
Bachelor's degree	.47	-	0 – 1
Married	.25	-	0 – 1
Number of children	.43	.83	0 – 5

N=1,302

As all outcomes are measured as continuous standardized scales generated from multiple items,

analyses are conducted using multivariate ordinary least squares regression. I first estimate the

simultaneous effects of key parent religiosity variables, specifically W1 parental worship

attendance, importance of faith, and religious conservatism on respondent W4 religiosity in a

reduced model, followed by a model interacting parental religious conservatism and importance

of faith. (Parental religious conservatism and attendance were interacted in a model not shown,

but the effect was only marginally significant even without controls). I then examine these same

effects with all controls. For the additional three outcomes measuring young adult moral and

religious attitudes in four separate models: a reduced model including only the three key parent

religiosity predictors, a controlled model adding demographic items, a mediated model with key

predictors as well as items pertaining to W1 family religious life, and finally, a full model with

all predictors included.

RESULTS

Religious Transmission

Results for the association between parental religious items and respondent W4 religiosity are

shown in Table 2. Model 1a shows that W1 parental worship attendance (b=.06, p<.001),

importance of faith (b=.20, p<.001), and self-reported religious conservatism (b=.17, p<.001)

each have an independent and highly significant effect, though this is smaller for worship

attendance than the other predictors. Model 1b shows a statistically significant positive

interaction between parental importance of faith and religious conservatism, (b=.05, p<.05),

revealing that religious transmission occurs more strongly for respondents with religiously

conservative parents. In this model, each of the interacted variables are mean-deviated, meaning

Table 2: OLS Regression Coefficients for Standardized Religiosity, Wave IV

Predictor	Model 1a		Model 1b		Model 1c		Model 1d	
W1 Parental Religiosity								
Worship attendance	.06***	(.02)	.07***	(.02)	.00	(.02)	.00	(.02)
Importance of faith	.20***	(.03)	.23***	(.03)	.09***	(.02)	.11***	(.02)
Religious conservatism	.17***	(.03)	.17***	(.03)	.10***	(.02)	.10***	(.02)
Faith x Rel. conservatism			.05*	(.02)			.03+	(.02)
W1 Family/Religious Life								
Parent-child closeness					.06*	(.03)	.06*	(.03)
Parents married					.03	(.06)	.02	(.06)
Parents – same religion					.04	(.05)	.04	(.05)
Parent-teen shared worship					.14*	(.06)	.15*	(.06)
Teen religious schooling					.16*	(.08)	.16*	(.08)
Observe sabbath					.21***	(.04)	.21***	(.04)
Family prays together					.16**	(.05)	.16**	(.05)
Grace before meals					.10+	(.06)	.10+	(.06)
Family religious discussion					.09***	(.02)	.08***	(.02)
W1 Parent Religious Tradition[a]								
Mainline Protestant					-.24***	(.06)	-.24***	(.07)
Black Protestant					.20+	(.12)	.20+	(.12)
Catholic					-.21***	(.05)	-.20***	(.06)
Jewish					-.28*	(.11)	-.30**	(.11)
Latter-Day Saint (Mormon)					-.10	(.10)	-.11	(.10)
Other/None					-.18	(.11)	-.19+	(.11)
W1 Parent Education[b]								
Less than high school					.23	(.15)	.22	(.15)
Some college					-.13*	(.06)	-.14*	(.06)
Bachelor's degree					-.17**	(.06)	-.18**	(.06)
Advanced degree					-.20**	(.07)	-.21**	(.07)
W4 Respondent Characteristics								
Female					.21***	(.05)	.21***	(.05)
Age					.02	(.02)	.02	(.02)
Bachelor's degree					.15*	(.06)	.15*	(.06)
Black					.14	(.11)	.15	(.11)
Hispanic					.08	(.08)	.09	(.08)
Other race					-.03	(.13)	-.03	(.13)
Married					.29***	(.05)	.28***	(.05)
Number of children					.08**	(.03)	.08**	(.03)
R^2	.19		.19		.37		.37	

*+p<.10 * p<.05 ** p<.01 ***p<.001*
Standard error in parentheses
[a] Reference: Conservative Protestant
[b] Reference: High school

that the main effect of each can be interpreted as the effect when the other is held at the mean. In other words, when parental importance of faith is held at the mean, a one-category increase in religious conservatism is associated with a .17 standard-deviation increase in respondent

religiosity ($b=.17$, $p<.001$) and when religious conservatism is held at the mean, a one-category

increase in importance of faith is associated with a .23 standard-deviation increase in respondent

religiosity ($b=.23$, $p<.001$). For a one unit increase in either parental importance of faith or

attendance, the effect of the other increases by .05. Model 1c shows that when both

demographic controls and family religious variables are included, the strength of the key

relationships are weakened. Specifically, the effect of parental worship attendance on later

respondent religiosity is mediated entirely ($b=.00$, n.s.) while those of importance of faith ($b=.09$,

$p<.001$) and religious conservatism ($b=.10$, $p<.001$) are reduced, though still highly significant.

In Model 1d, the positive interaction between parental importance of faith and religious

conservatism is reduced to only marginal significance ($b=.03$, $p<.10$). Additional analyses

(available upon request) show that the interaction here retains full significance in a model only

adding demographic controls ($b=.06$, $p<.05$), but loses significance entirely in a model only

adding mediating variables ($b=.03$, n.s.).

This change in significance of the interaction term appears to be due to a process of mediated

moderation. Mediated moderation is indicated when the moderating effect of a variable occurs

through another mediating variable, so that when the mediating variable is included in the

analysis, the moderating effect is reduced or loses significance (Muller, Judd, and Yzerbyt 2005).

The criteria for mediated moderation are met when (a) there is a significant interaction effect

between a key variable and a moderator on an outcome, (b) there is a significant interaction

effect between the same key variable and moderator in predicting a *mediator,* and (c) in an

analysis regressing the outcome on the key variable, moderator, mediator, an interaction term

between the key variable and the moderator, and another interaction term between the moderator

and the mediator, the main effect of the mediator is significant, while the effect size of the

interaction between the key variable and moderator is reduced relative to the model from

criterion (a). (See Muller et al. 2005 for more details on mediated moderation.)

As applied to the present case, the key predictor is W1 parental importance of faith, the

moderator is parental religious conservatism, and the outcome is respondent W4 religiosity.

Several of the variables for family religious life meet the above criteria as mediators, specifically

frequency with which the family discussed religious matters in the home at W1, whether the

family says grace before meals, whether they observe a weekly sabbath, and whether they pray

together (outside of grace before meals). In substantive terms, this means that parental

importance of faith predicts young adult religiosity more strongly when the parents identify as

more religiously conservative, and this is accounted for in part because religiously conservative

parents incorporate especially high levels of religious practice into family life.

Elements of family religious life also mediate the main effects of key parental predictors, as seen

in Model 1d. Family observance of the sabbath ($b=.21$, $p<.001$) and religious discussion in the

home ($b=.08$, $p<.001$) serve as both mediators of the effects of parent religious items, and highly

significant independent predictors of W4 religiosity. Children of more highly educated parents

exhibit significantly lower religiosity than those whose parents only graduated high school.

Women ($b=.21$, $p<.001$), respondents with Bachelor's degrees ($b=.15$, $p<.05$), and those who are

married ($b=.28$, $p<.001$) or have more children ($b=.08$, $p<.01$) are significantly more religious at

W4, consistent with previous research. The R-squared for the full model is .37, indicating strong

predictive power for the included variables.

Religious and Moral Attitudes

Results for the relationship between predictors and respondent W4 favorability toward religion

are displayed in Table 3. Among key predictors, parental religious conservatism has the

strongest and most significant effect (b=.11, p<.001), while those for worship attendance (b=.04,

p<.05) and importance of faith (b=.07, p<.01) are more modest. In the mediated Model 2c, both

importance of faith and worship attendance are no longer significant, and the effect of parental

religious conservatism is reduced (b=.07, p<.05). In the full model, only parental religious

conservatism maintains a significant independent effect (b=.07, p<.05). Parent-teen W1

closeness (b=.07, p<.05) shared worship (b=.07, p<.05) and observance of the sabbath (b=.17,

p<.01) are the only significant family or religious predictors of respondent favorability toward

religion. As with religiosity, women (b=.13, p<.05), respondents Bachelor's degrees (b=.17,

p<.05), and those who are married (b=.21, p<.001) have significantly more positive attitudes

about religion, as do African-Americans compared to whites (b=.39, p<.01). Notably, those

from Latter-Day Saint background (b=.36, p<.001) are highly significantly more favorable

toward religion than any other denominational group. This effect is especially striking given this

group's relatively small proportion in the sample (4%). The R-squared value of the full model is

.14, indicating fairly modest predictive power for this outcome.

Model 3a in Table 4 shows a strong, highly significant positive relationship between both

parental worship attendance (b=.07, p<001) and religious conservatism (b=.17, p<.001) on W4

respondent moral absolutism, and a more modest effect of importance of faith (b=.06, p<.05).

Inclusion of demographic controls in Model 3b does not substantially change these patterns.

However, when including mediators in Model 3c, the effects of both worship attendance (b=.04,

Table 3: OLS Regression Coefficients for Standardized Favorability Toward Religion, Wave IV

Predictor	Model 2a		Model 2b		Model 2c		Model 2d	
W1 Parental Religiosity								
Worship attendance	.04*	(.02)	.05**	(.02)	.00	(.02)	.01	(.02)
Importance of faith	.08**	(.03)	.05*	(.03)	.04	(.03)	.03	(.03)
Religious conservatism	.11***	(.03)	.11***	(.03)	.07*	(.03)	.07*	(.03)
W1 Family/Religious Life								
Parent-child closeness					.08*	(.03)	.07*	(.03)
Parents married					-.02	(.08)	.04	(.07)
Parents – same religion					.06	(.07)	.06	(.06)
Parent-teen shared worship					.17*	(.08)	.16*	(.07)
Teen religious schooling					.09	(.10)	.08	(.10)
Observe sabbath					.19**	(.06)	.17**	(.06)
Family prays together					.05	(.05)	.06	(.05)
Grace before meals					.01	(.08)	.03	(.08)
Family religious discussion					.01	(.02)	.00	(.03)
W1 Parent Religious Tradition[a]								
Mainline Protestant					-.13	(.08)	-.12	(.08)
Black Protestant					.21*	(.11)	-.14	(.16)
Catholic					-.14*	(.07)	-.14+	(.07)
Jewish					-.14	(.18)	-.10	(.18)
Latter-Day Saint (Mormon)					.39***	(.09)	.36***	(.10)
Other/None					-.22*	(.11)	-.18	(.11)
W1 Parent Education[b]								
Less than high school			.15	(.16)			.14	(.16)
Some college			-.12+	(.07)			-.14*	(.06)
Bachelor's degree			-.20**	(.07)			-.20**	(.07)
Advanced degree			-.22*	(.09)			-.22**	(.08)
W4 Respondent Characteristics								
Female			.14**	(.05)			.13*	(.05)
Age			.03	(.02)			.04	(.02)
Bachelor's degree			.17*	(.07)			.17*	(.07)
Black			.31***	(.07)			.39**	(.13)
Hispanic			.12	(.08)			.15+	(.08)
Other race			-.11	(.11)			-.06	(.11)
Married			.27***	(.05)			.21***	(.05)
Number of children			.05	(.04)			.04	(.04)
R^2	.06		.11		.10		.14	

*+p<.10 * p<.05 ** p<.01 ***p<.001*
Standard error in parentheses
[a] Reference: Conservative Protestant
[b] Reference: High school

$p<.05$) and religious conservatism ($b=.11$, $p<.001$) decrease in strength, while the effect of

importance of faith is mediated entirely ($b=.02$, n.s.). Model 3d shows that of the key predictors,

only parental religious conservatism remains significant when holding all other variables

constant ($b=.09$, $p<.001$). Among mediating variables, W1 adolescent religious

Table 4: OLS Regression Coefficients for Standardized Moral Absolutism, Wave IV

Predictor	Model 3a		Model 3b		Model 3c		Model 3d	
W1 Parental Religiosity								
Worship attendance	.07***	(.02)	.06**	(.02)	.04*	(.02)	.03	(.02)
Importance of faith	.06*	(.03)	.07*	(.03)	.02	(.03)	.03	(.03)
Religious conservatism	.17***	(.02)	.14***	(.02)	.11***	(.02)	.09***	(.02)
W1 Family/Religious Life								
Parent-child closeness					.03	(.02)	.02	(.02)
Parents married					.20**	(.06)	.10+	(.06)
Parents – same religion					-.14**	(.05)	-.14**	(.05)
Parent-teen shared worship					.02	(.08)	.00	(.07)
Teen religious schooling					.33***	(.09)	.26**	(.09)
Observe sabbath					.22***	(.06)	.19**	(.06)
Family prays together					.06	(.06)	.10+	(.06)
Grace before meals					.12*	(.05)	.13*	(.06)
Family religious discussion					.02	(.02)	.03	(.02)
W1 Parent Religious Tradition[a]								
Mainline Protestant					-.24**	(.07)	-.26**	(.07)
Black Protestant					-.36**	(.11)	-.02	(.18)
Catholic					-.38***	(.07)	-.32***	(.07)
Jewish					-.25	(.16)	-.31*	(.16)
Latter-Day Saint (Mormon)					.18	(.15)	.12	(.13)
Other/None					-.11	(.12)	-.02	(.12)
W1 Parent Education[b]								
Less than high school			.57**	(.16)			.59***	(.14)
Some college			.02	(.08)			.02	(.08)
Bachelor's degree			.02	(.09)			.04	(.09)
Advanced degree			.10	(.10)			.10	(.10)
W4 Respondent Characteristics								
Female			.02	(.05)			.02	(.05)
Age			.00	(.02)			.01	(.02)
Bachelor's degree			.21***	(.06)			.25***	(.06)
Black			-.17*	(.08)			-.28*	(.14)
Hispanic			-.29**	(.08)			-.23*	(.09)
Other race			-.20*	(.08)			-.20*	(.09)
Married			.54***	(.06)			.46***	(.06)
Number of children			-.05	(.05)			-.06+	(.03)
R²	.11		.19		.18		.25	

*+p<.10 * p<.05 ** p<.01 ***p<.001*
Standard error in parentheses
[a] Reference: Conservative Protestant
[b] Reference: High school

schooling (*b*=.26, *p*<.01) and observation of the sabbath (*b*=.19, *p*<.01) are each highly

significant predictors of respondent moral absolutism. Educational effects are inconsistent, as

parents with *lower* levels of education (less than high school compared to high school, *b*=.59,

p<.001) have children with higher levels of moral absolutism, while for respondents, *higher*

education in the form of a Bachelor's degree predicts a higher score for this same outcome (b=.25, p<.001). Notably, the effect of married status on moral absolutism is even higher than that for overall religiosity (b=.46, p<.001). This model has relatively strong predictive power as indicated by the R-squared value of .25.

Finally, results in Table 5 show the relationship between predictors and respondent W4 belief in transcendent authority. In Model 4a, parental importance of faith (b=.22, p<.001) and religious conservatism (b=.16, p<.001) are highly significantly associated with this outcome. The effect of parental worship attendance is more modest but still significant (b=.03, p<.05). When demographic controls are included in Model 4b, the coefficient for parental worship attendance becomes highly significant (b=.06, p<.001). Analyses not shown here indicate a suppression effect of race which was removed when this variable was included in the model. Specifically, those in the "other" race category have a higher rate of worship attendance than that for whites, but a significantly lower level of belief in transcendent authority. When including W1 family and religious variables in Models 4c and 4d, the effect of parental worship attendance is mediated entirely. In the full model, the effects of religious conservatism (b=.08, p<.01) and importance of faith (b=.10, p<.001) are reduced by half compared to Model 4a. The strongest additional independent predictors of W4 belief in transcendent authority are frequency of family religious discussion in the home at W1 (b=.08, p<.01), being married at W4 (b=.31, p<.001), and number of children (b=.09, p<.001). Respondents with more educated parents have significantly lower levels for this outcome. Compared to other outcomes, belief in transcendent authority sees the strongest effects, and therefore the sharpest distinctions, between respondents of parents from different educational levels and denominational affiliations.

Table 5: OLS Regression Coefficients for Standardized Transcendent Authority, Wave IV

Predictor	Model 4a		Model 4b		Model 4c		Model 4d	
W1 Parental Religiosity								
Worship attendance	.03*	(.02)	.06***	(.02)	-.02	(.02)	.00	(.02)
Importance of faith	.22***	(.03)	.17***	(.02)	.12***	(.02)	.10***	(.02)
Religious conservatism	.16***	(.03)	.15***	(.02)	.08**	(.03)	.08**	(.02)
W1 Family/Religious Life								
Parent-child closeness					.05+	(.03)	.04	(.03)
Parents married					-.02	(.06)	.07	(.06)
Parents – same religion					.08	(.06)	.08	(.06)
Parent-teen shared worship					.09	(.07)	.10	(.07)
Teen religious schooling					.15+	(.08)	.20*	(.08)
Observe sabbath					.19**	(.06)	.15**	(.06)
Family prays together					.09+	(.05)	.10*	(.04)
Grace before meals					.06	(.06)	.09	(.06)
Family religious discussion					.09**	(.02)	.08**	(.03)
W1 Parent Religious Tradition[a]								
Mainline Protestant					-.34***	(.06)	-.24***	(.06)
Black Protestant					.21*	(.09)	.10	(.15)
Catholic					-.35***	(.06)	-.25***	(.06)
Jewish					-.53***	(.13)	-.36**	(.13)
Latter-Day Saint (Mormon)					-.18	(.12)	-.19+	(.11)
Other/None					-.58***	(.11)	-.39**	(.11)
W1 Parent Education[b]								
Less than high school			.30+	(.18)			.34*	(.15)
Some college			-.17*	(.08)			-.15*	(.08)
Bachelor's degree			-.30***	(.08)			-.26***	(.07)
Advanced degree			-.39***	(.08)			-.36***	(.08)
W4 Respondent Characteristics								
Female			.13*	(.05)			.12*	(.05)
Age			-.01	(.02)			.01	(.02)
Bachelor's degree			-.05	(.07)			-.02	(.06)
Black			.28**	(.08)			.10	(.13)
Hispanic			-.12	(.08)			-.08	(.08)
Other race			-.38**	(.11)			-.30*	(.12)
Married			.40***	(.05)			.31***	(.05)
Number of children			.10***	(.03)			.09**	(.03)
R^2	.16		.27		.28		.35	

*+p<.10 * p<.05 ** p<.01 ***p<.001*
Standard error in parentheses
[a] Reference: Conservative Protestant
[b] Reference: High school

Overall, models for each of these outcomes show a positive and significant relationship between

parents' religious conservatism and related moral attitudes in their children. In most cases,

parental levels of worship attendance and importance of faith also have positive effects, though

they vary in strength and the effect of parental worship attendance is entirely mediated in all full

models. Aside from key parental religiosity variables, observance of a sabbath at W1 and

married status at W4 are the most consistent and powerful predictors across outcomes.

DISCUSSION

In this study I find positive support for the proposition that religiously conservative parents are

especially effective at transmitting their beliefs to their children. Through use of statistical

controls and interactions, I show that this transmission is not simply a function of the fact that

these parents tend to report higher strength of belief or worship attendance. Neither can it be

reduced to the effects of different denominational cultures. Rather, there is something about

religious conservatism itself that promotes greater strength of transmission between parents and

their millennial children, only partially accounted for by greater incorporation of religious

activity into family life.

These children represent a contrast to the larger trends within their age cohort. Millennials

overall are less religious than their elders in terms of either frequency of worship attendance or

rate of affiliation, and more likely to espouse liberal views or attitudes antithetical to religious

conservatism (Voas and Chaves 2016). Indeed, many turn away from religion specifically

because they associate it with conservative politics (Hout and Fisher 2002, 2014). Given this

context, it is plausible to expect that the children of religious conservative parents would be the

first to turn away. After all, they likely experience the connection between religion and politics

most intensely in either family or church contexts, and have the most exposure to conservative

attitudes inconsonant with those of the bulk of their cohort peers. It is arguable that compared to

children of religiously moderate or liberal parents, these respondents should encounter the

greatest intergenerational religious *tension*, which should then lead to the greatest religious *decline*.

However, such an account is not supported in the results of this study. Religious conservative family background actually appears to serve as a protective factor *against* millennial religious decline. Mediated models suggest this is due in part to more active religious socialization on the part of religiously conservative parents, especially family observation of the sabbath and family discussion of religious issues in the home during adolescence. These efforts may foster more robust religious habits in youth which they carry with them into adulthood. It is further possible that among religiously conservative families, religion plays an especially central or structuring role in family life. To the extent that religious conservatism is characterized by prescriptive ideas about moral belief and behavior, these parents may feel more invested in the religiosity of their children. Their children may, therefore, feel greater parental support and/or pressure in the maintenance of their religious lives. Additionally, among these millennials, religion may form a more central, rather than auxiliary, aspect of personal identity which produces a buffering effect against contrasting influences from cohort trends. This is consistent with the principles of subcultural identity theory (Smith 1998).

Intergenerational continuity is not limited to religiosity, but includes moral attitudes as well, though to varying degrees. While parental religious conservatism is positively associated with favorability toward religion, the relationship is modest. Similarly, other family, religious, and demographic predictors are either insignificant or have small effect sizes, the exception being respondent's Wave IV educational attainment. As favorability toward religion was measured as

the inverse of negativity toward religion, it is possible that this scale reflects a rejection of that negativity, as distinct from approval of religion in general. In other words, higher scores may indicate *tolerance* rather than *endorsement*. This would be consistent with findings from an earlier wave of NSYR suggesting that millennials are averse to making judgments or condemnations of the beliefs of others, and with other research which finds associations between education and tolerant attitudes (Smith and Snell 2009). Therefore, of the attitudes explored here, favorability toward religion may be the least reflective of religious conservatism.

In contrast, parental religious conservatism is strongly associated with both young adult moral absolutism and belief in transcendent authority. Wave I variables of family religious life also exert stronger effects on these outcomes, and the overall models are more highly predictive. The fact that religious schooling is an independently significant predictor for each of these items (but not religiosity or attitudes toward religion) suggests that while such education in itself has only a minor direct effect on religiosity, it may provide a religiously-based cognitive framework in which to think about moral issues, which persists even where religious practice does not. Somewhat surprisingly, Wave IV married status also has a strong and significant relationship with both moral absolutism and transcendent authority, more even than on religiosity itself. While research suggests religious engagement for married couples may relate to shared belief, practice, or community support, it is less clear why marriage should be so strongly associated with particular moral attitudes (Marks 2005). As marriage, moral absolutism, and belief in transcendent authority are all measured at the same time, the cause and effect in this case are difficult to disentangle. It is possible that respondents who hold these attitudes were already drawn to the long-term stability and commitment offered by marriage, as well as to its frequently

religious significance. It is equally likely that, having entered into the personal commitment of marriage, these respondents develop a greater appreciation of the need for fixed and shared moral commitments (moral absolutism), as well as the need to ground these commitments in a stable source, which they may interpret as God's law (transcendent authority). Concerns of moral formation may take on increased salience as couples start to have children or contemplate doing so, and indeed, higher numbers of children also strongly predict respondent belief in transcendent authority (but not moral absolutism). However, these are, at present, speculations which warrant further study.

Although the relationship between parental religiosity measures and outcomes cannot be reduced to religious denomination, clear denominational differences are still observed. Specifically, for both overall religiosity and clusters of moral attitudes, children of Conservative Protestants have higher levels than nearly any other group, showing the greatest contrast with those from Mainline Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish backgrounds. This finding is consistent with past research demonstrating the vitality of Evangelical Christian churches, classified here as Conservative Protestant (Smith 1998). The only exceptions come from religious groups with lower representation in the sample. Specifically, Latter-Day Saints (Mormons) have significantly more favorable views about religion than any other group, while Black Protestants have the highest levels of belief in transcendent authority (though this latter effect is not significant in the full model, possibly due to multicollinearity between respondent identification as black, and parent identification as Black Protestant). In purely denomination terms, however, Conservative Protestant parents seem to foster the highest levels of religious conservatism in their children overall.

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I have here examined differences in strength of religious transmission between religiously conservative versus moderate or liberal families, comparing levels of continuity rather than change. I do not address the question of strength of transmission in absolute terms. It is therefore possible that what I frame here as stronger religious transmission for this group of millennials could simply be viewed as weaker decline. In other words, young adult children of religious conservative parents may be undergoing the same process of secularization as the rest of their age cohort, moving at a slower pace but toward the same destination. However, these results may also be indicative of a particular facet of sociocultural polarization. Past research finds, in the first place, that religiosity has become increasingly associated with conservative ideology in recent decades, and in the second, that many millennials have distanced themselves from religion for this very reason, as mentioned above (Putnam and Campbell 2010; Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014; Campbell et al. 2018). The present study shows, however, that this aversion is *least* applicable to those millennials whose parents' religious ideology is *most* conservative. It follows that the religious gap between these different groups of millennials is widening, a conclusion consistent with other findings on current trends in the religious landscape (Schnabel and Bock 2017). These differences are not limited to religious behavior, but apply to underlying moral attitudes as well. This suggests that, even among millennials, religious ideology is as likely to be an ongoing source of division as it is a point of emerging consensus.

CONCLUSION

In this study I used panel data from Wave I and IV of NSYR to show that religiosity transmits between generations more strongly in religiously conservative than moderate or liberal families.

I have further demonstrated the link between religious conservatism of parents and a variety of conservative moral attitudes in their children, including favorability toward religion, moral absolutism and belief in transcendent authority. In controlling for parental religiosity and denomination, I find that these effects are due to religious conservatism specifically and cannot be entirely reduced to related factors. Finally, I have found evidence that this religious transmission occurs in part through the mediating effects of family religious practice when respondents were in adolescence. I conclude that religiously conservative family background serves as a buffer for millennials against the larger cohort trend of declining religious attendance and affiliation. This indicates a dynamic of millennial religious divergence, as opposed to uniform decline.

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