

Press release

How religion is transmitted in families

International survey in Europe and Canada: sociologists of religion at the University of Münster in Germany investigate how beliefs and values are transmitted to future generations – No precise explanations provided yet for the decline in religiosity in Western societies

Münster, 1. October 2019 (exc) Given the decline in religiosity in Western societies, sociologists from the University of Münster’s Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” are carrying out a study in Europe and Canada to determine how and why religion is transmitted to the next generation in some families and not in others. “We know that a person’s religiosity depends very much on their upbringing. However, we know little about how exactly values, norms and patterns of interpretation are transmitted between the generations of a family, what leads to their being transmitted or not being transmitted, and how religiosity changes in the process”, explain the sociologists of religion Christel Gärtner and Olaf Müller from the Cluster of Excellence. “What is undisputed is that church religiosity is declining in Western countries, and that there is a link here to changed ideas in religious upbringing. But there is a lack of exact data and explanations as to why some families want or are able to transmit their faith and others not”. The group comprising researchers from five countries will receive almost 1.8 million euros in funding from the American John Templeton Foundation until 2022.

The research team will interview families in Canada, Finland, Germany, Hungary, and Italy in a representative survey and in qualitative interviews with family members from three generations (grandparents, parents and children). The five countries were selected on the basis of their historical differences in terms of religion, society and culture. Besides Christel Gärtner, Olaf Müller, Linda Hennig-Yildirim, and Chiara Porada from the University of Münster, the research group includes Kati Tervo-Niemelä from the University of Eastern Finland, Gergely Rosta from Pázmány Péter Catholic University Budapest, Roberta Ricucci from the University of Turin, and Peter Beyer and Guillaume Boucher from the University of Ottawa. The project is located in the Cluster of Excellence’s Centre for Religion and Modernity at the University of Münster.

Liberal parents are transmitting their religion less and less

“That church religiosity and practice have been continuously declining since the 1960s is empirically proven and undisputed”, says Christel Gärtner. In most Western countries, religious upbringing and the authoritarian style of parenting have declined since the 1970s, and conveying the dogmatic beliefs of the church is no longer a primary goal in families. “But there is no agreement in the research on how to explain the empirical findings regarding the discontinuation of religion”. One common interpretation is that it is a generational effect: religiously liberal parents are transmitting their religiosity less and less to their children. This is particularly the case when people marry – if the spouse belongs to a different faith or is not religious, then the children will be less religious than those from families with only one religion. “But this cannot explain *how* religion is transmitted or discontinued between the generations”, says Christel Gärtner.

The project is called “The transmission of religion across generations: a comparative international study of continuities and discontinuities in family socialization”. Established in 1987, the John Templeton Foundation, which is based in Pennsylvania, provides funding for research in physics, biology, psychology, the social sciences, philosophy, and theology. In 2018, it provided funding of 323 million dollars for 322 projects. (vvm)

Caption: Sociologists of Religion Christel Gärtner and Olaf Müller (Photos: Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”)

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The Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics”

The Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics. Dynamics of Tradition and Innovation” has been investigating since 2007 the complex relationship between religion and politics across eras and cultures. The 140 researchers from 20 disciplines in the humanities and social sciences focus in the funding phase (2019 to 2025) on the “dynamics of tradition and innovation”. They analyze in transepocheal studies ranging from antiquity to the present day the conditions and factors that make religion an engine of political and social change, with their focus being above all on the paradox that religions often develop their innovative potential precisely by drawing on their traditions. The researchers concentrate on the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and on their polytheistic precursors. The focus of interest is on Europe and the Mediterranean region, as well as on their entanglements with the Near East, Africa, North and Latin America. The research network is the largest of its kind in Germany; and, of the Clusters of Excellence, one of the oldest and the only one to deal with the issue of religion. It will receive funding of 31 million euros from 2019 to 2025.