
PARENTAL EXAMPLE IS FACTOR FOR THOSE WHO KEEP FAITH Many Cite 'Hypocrisy' as Reason for Leaving Church

Parents who want their children to keep the faith would do well to lead by example, attending worship services as a family and living up to religious principles in their lives, new research has found.

In a study of college students in the United States and Canada, sociologists at the University of Calgary found young people were more likely to keep their religious beliefs if they attended church at age 10 and first experienced doubts later in their teenage years.

Other than a gradual drift into disbelief, "hypocrisy among church members" was the most important source of doubt reported by people who left their childhood faith in the study published in the current issue of the *Review of Religious Research*.

Sociologist David Roozen of Hartford Seminary said the study findings are particularly important in an age of highly publicized sexual and financial scandals involving clergy and as baby boomers, many of whom rebelled against organized religion in their youth, and are now raising the next generation.

"Their kids know that their parents weren't saints either, particularly when they were growing up. So there is a lot of room for seeing hypocrisy," Roozen said.

For a long time, research on church membership has concentrated on why people switch to other churches, as opposed to examining reasons some leave altogether.

But the continuing membership decline in some churches, particularly among youth, has given new urgency to research into apostasy, defined as the act of abandoning religion.

In the new study, Merlin B. Brinkerhoff and Marlene M. Mackie sought to examine religious attitudes over time by studying data from questionnaires from 631 college students in the mid- 1980s in a social science classes at the University of Calgary and the University of Nebraska.

Mackie said the students interviewed did not represent a random sample, but provide some new data about why people leave churches.

In general, those who leave their childhood beliefs and denominations behind reported having more liberal world views, but being less satisfied in life, less happy and having lower self-esteem than those who maintained their earlier religious beliefs.

The study found people raised as mainline Protestants were the most likely to abandon religion, with Roman Catholics and conservative Protestants the most likely to retain their faith.

Breaking down the findings further, researchers found relationships between childhood behaviors and beliefs and current religious status.

"The greater their attendance at age 10, the greater the persistence of their beliefs. The older they were before encountering doubts, the greater their belief persistence.... Finally, the greater the number of doubts during youth, the less likely that their childhood beliefs persisted," Brinkerhoff and Mackie wrote.

Nearly 40 percent of the apostates, who first reported experiencing doubts at ages 13 and 14, said the perceived hypocrisy of church members was an important source of doubt.

Mackie said students reported perceiving hypocrisy in parents who attend church only on certain occasions, and in church members who make prejudicial remarks about ethnic groups or feel no remorse about cheating on taxes.