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# Passing on the Faith: how mother–child communication influences transmission of moral values

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**ABSTRACT** *This paper examines religious affiliation and commitment of teenagers as a function of the quality of mother–child interaction and the mothers’ religious commitment, as an illustration of the principle that transmission of parental norms and values to their children is facilitated or inhibited by the quality of their interaction. We expected that in cases where mother–child interaction was good, parents would be better able to impose their own values upon their children, resulting in a lower disaffiliation and higher religious commitment in high quality of family–interaction families. This expectation was tested using data from 223 British adolescent–mother pairs, by means of logistic and ordinary regression analysis. The results largely supported the hypotheses, exemplifying how mothers in their role of moral agents may profit from good mother–child relationships.*

The current study examines how transmission of moral (religious) values from mother to child is influenced by the quality of mother–child interaction. The assumption that underlies the current study is that parents fulfil an important function as social agents by providing norms and values to their offspring, and that the transmission of parental norms and values to their children is facilitated or inhibited by the *quality of their interaction*—which is, in turn, assumed to be dependent upon the style of parenting (Steinberg, 1990; Taris *et al.*, 1996).

Parental norms and values are the earliest to which the child is exposed, and thus provide the foundation for his/her subsequent development. As the Yankee in Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee at King Arthur’s court* remarks, “We have no thoughts of our own, no opinions of our own: they are transmitted to us, trained into us”. While it appears widely accepted that parents may influence their teenager’s values, as yet it is unclear under which circumstances this process of “intergenerational transmission of values” flourishes. In other papers, (Taris & Semin, in press, 1996; Taris *et al.*, 1996), we argued that the quality of mother–teenager interaction was a key factor in the transmission of these values. Previous research has shown that parents’ and children’s standards (especially regarding

sexuality) correspond more closely if their relationship is characterised by openness and warmth (cf. Burgess, 1973; DeLamater & MacCorquodale, 1979; Taris *et al.*, 1996), presumably because having good relationships with parents makes it easier for adolescents to see the reason behind the values of their parents, and, consequently, to accept these ("internalisation" of parental values, Jessor & Jessor, 1974; Acock & Bengtson, 1978; Inazu & Fox, 1980; but see Jennings & Niemi, 1968, who found no support for their expectation that parents' and adolescents' political attitudes would correspond more closely when their relationship is good). Thus, we expect that, in general, having good relationships with one's children is conducive to their moral education, as this makes it easier for parents to impose their own values upon their children.

The current paper takes this research into the realm of religious beliefs. The last decades have witnessed a strong decrease in the number of people indicating that they have a particular religion, at least in western Europe; in the United States, people relatively often switch from one religion to the other, thus mitigating this decrease somewhat (Warner, 1993). While it is not the aim of this report to speculate extensively about the possible causes of this process of secularisation, we will take the transmission of religious beliefs from parents to their children as a case study by which we intend to illustrate the importance of having good parent-child relationships. The growing numbers of people who do not belong to a particular religion seem to provide a good opportunity to test our main hypothesis that parents will be especially successful in providing their offspring with their own religious values if the quality of their interaction is good. Thus, the principal question to be answered here is: does good parent-child communication contribute to the degree to which parents are able impose their own religious values upon their children?

Individual-level approaches like ours have not frequently been employed in the study of religious mobility and disaffiliation, even though the relevant theories generally pose individual-level explanations. Additionally, the theories that have been developed generally focus upon factors outside the sphere of the adolescents' origin family. For example, one influential set of theories are status-based: religious switching and disaffiliation often occur more or less simultaneously with the occurrence of particular life events, resulting in differences in income, education or occupational prestige between switchers and members of their original faiths (e.g. Stark & Glock, 1968; Newport, 1979). However, recent studies by Sandomirsky and Wilson (1990) and Sherkat (1991) did not confirm these earlier findings: inter-generational educational mobility seems to have a negative effect on the likelihood of switching or disaffiliation, controlling other factors. With regard to our research question, the type of life events addressed by the status-based theories has usually not yet occurred for the population of 14-18-year-olds studied here, making it impossible to test this type of theory. Yet it seems possible that subjects abandon their faith even before they have experienced such life events; we presume that one's religious education will lay the foundations for holding on firmly to one's belief, and this groundwork will often have been completed somewhere during adolescence.

Other theories have focused upon the family of procreation (e.g. Sandomirsky & Wilson, 1990; Stolzenberg *et al.*, 1995), revealing that the likelihood of exit from

the religious affiliation of one's parents increases if an individual marries outside his or her original religious preference: again, this type of event is not likely to occur for the age group studied here; upon the importance of social networks which may facilitate holding on to one's original religion, or—after geographic mobility—a conversion to another religious movement (Stark & Bainbridge, 1980; Rochford, 1985); and upon generational characteristics (mainly the countercultural generation of the 1960s, Wuthnow, 1976; Sherkat, 1991). Thus, it appears that the role of parents in transmitting their own religious values to their children, as well as the structure of the process that facilitates transmission, has been neglected so far. Indeed, as Sherkat (1991) argues, the influence of family variables on religiosity is one of the most neglected topics in this particular literature. Therefore, the object of the current study is twofold: (1) to provide additional evidence regarding the moderating effect of quality of family interaction upon the intergenerational transmission of values *in general*, and (2) to contribute empirical evidence relevant to the "data gap" signalled by Sherkat (1991) regarding the effects of family variables upon religious commitment of adolescents.

*Quality of parent-child relations.* A central concept in this study is the quality of parent-child interaction. Parenting styles usually belong to one of two core dimensions: one of care/involvement versus indifference/rejection (including behaviours/attitudes of accessibility, affection, sensitivity, cooperation and care), and one of control/overprotection versus encouragement of independence (behaviours/attitudes like strictness, intrusiveness and control, Parker *et al.*, 1979; Rollins & Thomas, 1979). While the "controlling" parenting style is largely geared towards preventing undesired teenage behaviour (for instance, by setting rules), the "involvement" parenting style is directed towards establishing good parent-child relationships (creating a "bond" between parent and child, Parker *et al.*, 1979). It appears that especially the "involvement" parenting style is conducive to the transmission of parental attitudes to their children (Burgess, 1973; Steinberg, 1990; Rueter & Conger, 1995; Taris *et al.*, 1996). Therefore, in this study we decided to concentrate upon the involvement parenting style only. In this paper we therefore denote by *high* quality of family interaction those families in which the behaviours of parents to their children are characterised by "involved" behaviours such as openness, affection and accessibility. Conversely, *low* quality of family interaction families are families in which intra-family interaction is characterised by the absence of these qualities.

*Passing on the faith: a model, and two hypotheses.* The current study aims to test a model that relates mother's religious commitment to the religious commitment of her offspring (cf. Acock & Bengtson, 1978). The strength of this relation is presumed to depend upon the quality of their interaction: if mother and child have a good relationship (in terms of the "involved" behaviours addressed earlier), the effect of mother's religious commitment upon the commitment of her child is expected to be stronger than when their interaction is relatively bad (denoted by a "+" sign in Fig. 1). We have two principal dependent variables in our model:

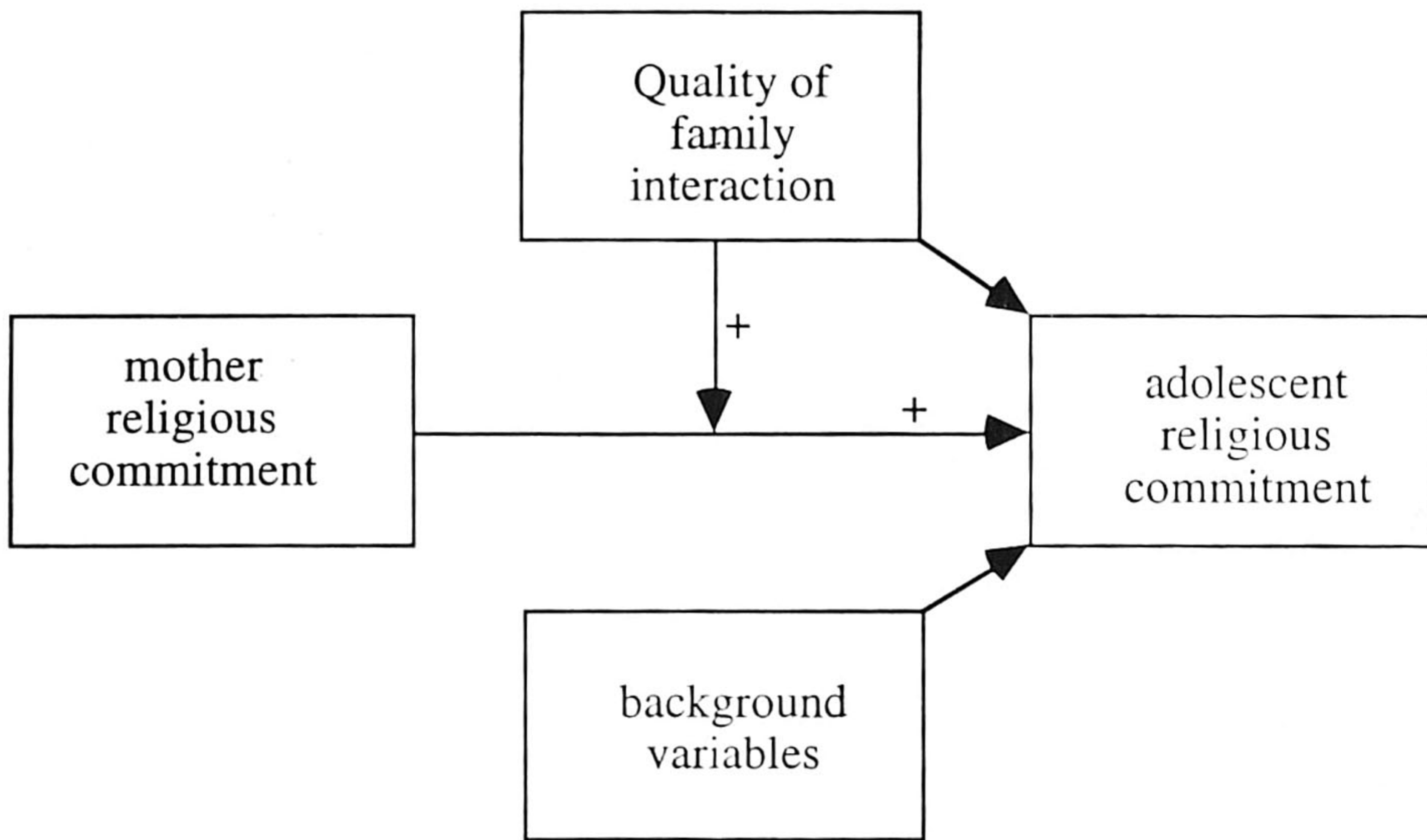


FIG. 1. Model for the relations among mother's and adolescent's religious commitment, quality of family interaction and background variables. Arrows pointing to arrows denote interaction (moderator) effects, i.e. the strength of the relation between mother's and adolescent's religious commitments should vary as a function of the quality of family interaction.

(1) whether or not the adolescent still holds on to the religious denomination of his/her mother; and (2) a measure of the adolescents' commitment to his/her religion (if the adolescent has the same religious denomination as the mother). For both measures we have the same hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1:* the adolescent adherence to the mother's religious denomination is positively influenced by the mother's commitment to her denomination. The strength of this effect varies as a function of the quality of mother-child interaction; and

*Hypothesis 2:* the adolescent's commitment to his/her religion is influenced by the mother's commitment to her religion, and the strength of this effect varies as a function of the quality of mother-child interaction.

Apart from the variables mentioned above, we also control the effects of a number of other variables possibly of relevance to the intergenerational transmission of values. These include "standard" controls such as age of the teenager, age of the mother, the adolescent's gender, family status (intact or not), and socio-economic status. In other contexts these variables have been shown to be relevant to the process of transmission of values (Taris & Semin, 1995; Taris *et al.*, 1996), and they often play an important role in the occurrence of adolescent problem behaviour (e.g. Rueter & Conger, 1995); in so far as such problem behaviour is a result of a parental

failure to transmit socially desirable norms and values to their offspring, this literature suggests that these variables could be relevant in determining the match between parental and adolescent norms and values. As a consequence, it is desirable to control their effects in order to obtain unbiased estimates of the effects of the other variables in our model.

## Method

### *Sample*

The data used here were collected in 1989 in the Brighton and Hove area, Sussex, UK. A sample of 333 adolescent–mother pairs completed a structured questionnaire administered individually in the presence of an interviewer. The adolescents were 14–18 years old,  $M_{\text{age}} = 15.84$  ( $SD = 1.10$ ), and 52.5% were female. Only mothers were interviewed, as they usually are considerably more involved in the upbringing of their children than fathers. Additionally, the study by Acock and Bengtson (1978) showed that mothers exerted greater influence than fathers upon the religious commitment of adolescents.

We used random location sampling to obtain a sample with similar socio-economic characteristics to the population of Brighton and Hove. To this aim, we adopted the ACORN classification system developed by CACI (1989). The ACORN system divides neighbourhoods into groups based on similarities, in among others, income, education and household type. The principal assumption behind this system is that “birds of a feather flock together”, i.e. that people living in the same neighbourhood are more or less comparable in terms of their socio-economic characteristics. The ACORN system divides the Brighton and Hove area geographically into 603 about equally large enumeration districts. Of these, 594 contained usually resident population, and the average number of households within each district was 340. For each of these districts many variables in the census are available, including age, income, gender and household type. The ACORN classification system takes into account 40 of such variables. A cluster analysis on the basis of these variables allows each of these districts to be characterised in terms of its “typical” inhabitant; conversely, people can be categorised according to the type of residential area they live in (CACI, 1989). A comparison of the ACORN characteristics of the sample with data on the characteristics of all households in Brighton and Hove did not reveal major differences between the two. Thus there was no reason to assume that the sample was not representative of the target population.

Our questionnaire addressed, among other topics, religious commitment and denomination, parent–child interaction styles, and background factors such as age, gender and socio-economic status. From this sample, we selected all adolescent–mother pairs of which the mother said she belonged to either the Protestant church or the Church of England ( $N = 228$ ). We did not further distinguish between Church of England and Protestant Church; possible conversions from the one denomination to the other were not considered here. By restricting our attention to these two Protestant denominations only we meant to increase the homogeneity of

the sample. This is desirable, as religious mobility tends to vary rather strongly per denomination (Sandomirsky & Wilson, 1990; Iannacone, 1994). Only adolescent–mother pairs which had no missing values at any of the variables used in this study were incorporated, yielding a final sample size of 223 adolescent–mother pairs.

### *Variables*

*Quality of family interaction.* Seven items were designed to identify the way mother and child interacted with each other. As these items were measured separately for mother and child, there were in total fourteen responses per adolescent–mother pair available. We saw no reason to favour either the mothers' or the adolescents' judgements over the other, and scale analysis revealed that all 14 items could be combined into a single Quality of Family Interaction scale with a reliability of 0.82 (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ , Cronbach, 1986), and item–rest correlations that ranged between 0.26 to 0.54 (median 0.43). Typical items were (in the mothers' version) "I always listen to what my son/daughter has to say", "my son/daughter tells me most of the things that he/she does" and "I try hard to understand my son/daughter". A high score indicates that the members of this particular family have a good relationship in terms of (mutual) understanding, openness, and the like, and this is acknowledged by *both* parties. A low score indicates the reverse.

*Religious commitment/religious denomination.* Mother and adolescent were asked what their religious denomination was. If they said they had one, they were asked how committed they were to their religion (1 = "not at all", 7 = "extremely").

*Background variables.* Apart from the other variables, we included *mother's and adolescent's age*, *adolescent gender* (high = male), *socio-economic status*, and *family status* (high = intact; low = father of the child does not live with mother any more) in our analyses. Table I presents the means and standard deviations for the variables used in this study, separately for the families in which the adolescent did not have a religion and the families in which both mother and child had the same religious denomination.

A multivariate ANOVA showed that there were some differences between the groups,  $F(7,208) = 2.23$ ;  $P < 0.05$ . Table I reveals that the average age of the mothers is slightly higher in the second group; that the mothers' religious commitment is somewhat higher, and that this group also contains more females. Regarding the other variables, no differences were found. Also note that the adolescents' religious commitment is on average much lower than their mothers', means are 2.61 and 3.53, respectively.

*Procedure.* Below, we report the results of two analyses. First, we examined the effects of the explanatory variables upon leaving the faith. As this variable is a dichotomy, ordinary regression analysis is not appropriate here. Therefore, we used

TABLE I. Means and standard deviations (in brackets) for all variables, for disaffiliated adolescents and adolescents holding on to the religious affiliation of their mothers separately.

Variables		Disaffiliated adolescents (N = 61)	Adolescents same affiliation (N = 152)	F(1,214)
Family variables				
Family intact (high = yes)	X	0.79	0.74	NS
	SD	1.57	1.64	
Socio-economic status	X	2.61	2.63	NS
	SD	1.20	1.23	
Quality of family interaction	X	10.94	10.87	NS
	SD	1.47	1.54	
Variables for mother				
Age of mother	X	44.36	42.64	3.94*
	SD	6.03	4.99	
Religious commitment of mother	X	2.88	3.53	5.74
	SD	1.79	1.87	
Variables for teenager				
Religious commitment teenager	X	a	2.61	a
	SD	a	1.85	
Gender of adolescent (high = male)	X	0.59	0.41	5.92*
	SD	0.50	0.50	
Age of adolescent	X	16.83	16.86	NS
	SD	1.16	1.08	

\* $P(F) < 0.05$ . <sup>a</sup>Not available as teenager said not to be religiously affiliated.

logistic regression analysis (SPSS Inc., 1988); this procedure is especially suited for the analysis of dichotomous dependent variables (Finney, 1971). In a second analysis we examined the effects of the explanatory variables upon adolescent religious commitment. Only observations in which the adolescent said that s/he belonged to a particular religion were included. Here we used ordinary least squares regression analysis (SPSS Inc., 1988). In both analysis stepwise model fitting was used.

## Results

### *First analysis: leaving the faith*

Using logistic regression analysis, we examined which variables could explain why adolescents left the faith of their mothers. Table II presents the logistic regression estimates (second and third column). As Table II shows, the older the mother, the more likely it was that the adolescent would indicate that s/he had the same religious denomination as his/her mother. Additionally, we found that females were less likely to leave their mother's denomination than males. Relevant to our hypothesis, we did not find direct effects of mother's religious commitment and/or the quality of



TABLE II. Results of a logistic regression analysis (first analysis, disaffiliation as dependent variable,  $N = 216$ ) and an ordinary least squares regression analysis (second analysis: dependent variable is religious commitment teenager,  $N = 158$ ).

Variables	First analysis: leaving faith		Second analysis: religious commitment teenager	
	All effects	Sig. eff. only	All effects	Sig. eff. only
Age of mother	-0.028	-0.028*	0.076	
Family intact (high = yes)	0.018		-0.065	
Socio-economic status	0.030		-0.068	
Religious commitment of mother	0.571		-1.061	
Quality of family interaction*relcom moth	-0.043	-0.009*	1.452**	0.409***
Quality of family interaction	0.103		-0.410**	-0.139*
Gender of adolescent	-0.349*	-0.258**	-0.151*	-0.158*
Age of adolescent	0.004		-0.003	
$R^2$			0.23	0.19

\* $P < 0.05$ ; \*\* $P < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $P < 0.001$ .

intra-family interaction. However, our analyses revealed that the interaction of these two variables was significant (albeit not highly), such that if the quality of family interaction was good *and* mother was committed to her religion, adolescents were less likely to indicate that they had no religion than in other cases. This result supports Hypothesis 1: a high quality of family interaction seems indeed conducive to an effective transmission of religious values from mother to child.

*Second analysis: religious commitment.* We proceeded by analysing the effects of the explanatory variables upon our second variable of interest, namely the adolescent's religious commitment as measured by a single item (see Variables section). Only observations where the adolescent mentioned a religious denomination were included; the other observations (which were used in the first analysis) were discarded, resulting in a sample of 158 subjects. Table II shows that females were less committed to their religion than were males (a standardised path coefficient of  $-0.158$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ). Relevant to Hypothesis 2, in high quality of family interaction families the adolescents were less committed to their religion than in low quality of family interaction families. However, this effect was moderated by a strong interaction effect between Quality of Family Interaction and mother's religious commitment, such that if mother's commitment was high *and* intra-family interaction was good, the adolescent was more likely to be committed to his/her religion (a standardised effect of  $0.409$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). Thus, whereas quality of family interaction had a small negative direct effect upon adolescent religious commitment, in combination with the mother's religious commitment quality of family interaction seemed to

contribute to a high religious commitment of the teenager. Again, this result matched our expectations.

### Concluding Remarks

The current study sought to illustrate how parents in their roles as moral agents may profit from maintaining good relations with their teenager. As an example, we studied the transmission of religious commitment from mother to child. We found that if the quality of intra-family interaction was high, adolescents were (a) less likely to leave their faith; and (b) more likely to be committed to their religious denomination. Both results supported our hypotheses. As such, the current study underscores the importance of good parent-child relations during the socialisation process of young adults in general, in transmitting parents' religious values to their children in particular.

We believe that our results are of considerable interest to the study of the moral education of children. It is well known that adolescents are in a period of "religious rebellion" (Sherkat, 1991, p. 173), and that "young people strive to put some social distance between themselves and their religious roots" (Hout & Greeley, 1987, p. 331). Yet, despite the apparent low popularity of religion among the adolescents found in this and other studies, we were able to show that maintaining good relations with their children enabled mothers to transmit their own religious values to their children. We would expect that they will be even more successful when it comes to the transmission of less controversial values. As such, the illustration of the principle that maintaining good relations with one's children helps in their moral education presented here will give a relatively conservative impression of the strength of this process.

We wish to point out that we do not advocate a return to the old religious values. However, it is interesting to note that many—if not all—of the "widely shared, objectively important core values" (such as caring, honesty, fairness, responsiveness, respect for self and others) that should be the objective of a moral education (Lickona, 1996), are a subset of the classical *Christian* values. One might therefore expect that the religiously committed adolescents in our sample would also value these core values, as these are "part of the deal". This is, of course, not to say that the uncommitted or disaffiliated subjects would not also underscore these values: however, it seems that transmission of the comprehensive and integrated package of values offered by Christian religion will be less difficult than transmission of the same values, *without* such a guiding principle. To religiously committed subjects it is clear why particular values are valued; uncommitted subjects have more degrees of freedom in this respect, and the "proper" conduct may not always be unambiguously clear to them. Thus, in a sense it is the secularisation of western society that necessitates the development of "tools" suited for the moral education of children, as one traditional tool—transmission of moral "core" values via religion—seems to have become worn out (cf. the low levels of adolescent religious commitment reported in Table I).

The current study suggested that maintaining good parent-child relationships is

one of the more useful instruments in parents' toolboxes in transmitting parental values to their offspring. In principle we would expect that this not only applies to the transmission of religious values, but also to moral values in general—whether or not these are embedded in a firm religious belief or not. Thus, while our results strictly speaking only pertain to religious values, they are also of relevance to the transmission of moral values in general: in both cases a good parent–child interaction will be conducive to the internalisation of parental values.

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