Safety and Closeness in Religious Socialization: A Mixed Methods Study of Finnish Families

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Abstract

In this study, we analyze how do safety and closeness, or the lack of them, affect religious socialization in Finnish families. Our empirical data consist of family interviews and a large survey data. As a result, three key dimensions were found: 1) the atmosphere in families, 2) the atmosphere related to religious communities, and 3) the atmosphere related to one's own spirituality. Our study suggests several implications both for practice in religious and other communities of existential meaning and for the study of those communities and empirical theologies. The study is part of the international research project "The transmission of religion across generations: a comparative international study of continuities and discontinuities in family socialization", funded by Templeton Foundation.
Keywords

atmosphere – closeness – family – safety – socialization – spirituality

1 Introduction

What contributes to successful religious socialization within a family context, so that religion is transmitted to the next generation? Why are some parents more likely to transmit their religion to the next generation than others? These questions have risen actual around the Western countries during the 21st century when the traditional measures of religion have been declining at a greater rate than researchers had previously anticipated (Woodhead 2018; Beyer et al. 2017; Beyer 2018; Pollack and Rosta 2017; Voas & Chaves 2014).

There has been much research on the religiosity of young people in Western countries, which has mostly revealed a decline in religion (Huber 2008; Beyer 2010; Gabriel 1994; Garelli 2016; Ilg et al. 2017; Mason et al. 2007; Oertel 2004; Pace and Giordan 2010; Pickel 2010; Smith et al. 2012, Schweitzer et al. 2015, 2017; Smith 2003; Streib and Gennerich 2011; Ziebertz and Riegel 2008). Similarly, several studies (e.g. International Social Survey Programme [ISSP]; World Values Survey [WVS]; European Values Study [EVS]; Bertelsmann Religion Monitor; National Studies of Youth and Religion [NSYR]) have shown that religious upbringing in families is declining, especially in highly industrialized countries and most strongly in Europe (e.g. Bucher 2009; Niemelä 2011; Pollack and Müller 2012; Stolz et al. 2016; Smith and Denton 2005). Drawing on their studies in Switzerland, Stolz et al. (2016) argued that religious socialization has not only decreased, but also changed fundamentally in terms of its status – from being a social practice deemed natural and necessary to something that is considered optional. Although this development varies according to the country, there does seem to be a general trend that even parents who regard religion as important are failing to pass their religion on to their children (Voas & Doebler 2011).

In this article, we focus on the religious socialization in families. Several previous studies have shown that the role of parents and quality of the parent-child relationship are very meaningful when it comes to religious socialization. Therefore, in this article, our key question is, how exactly do safety and closeness – or the lack of these factors – affect religious socialization. This study is based on family interviews in Finnish families and a large survey data of five countries. The main focus in on families and their role in
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However, when talking of religion and its role in a family context, other religious socialization agents are also discussed, leading to the conclusion that religious socialization within families takes place in close association with such agents.

In the following, we present the concept of religious socialization, and after it move on to illustrate our empirical data and findings.

2 Theoretical Background: Religious Socialization

The process of religious socialization refers to an interactive process in which parents and other socialization agents influence individuals’ religious beliefs and understandings through which people come to hold religious preferences (Sherkat 2003; Klingenberg & Sjö 2019). For parents to whom religion is important, religion is a significant part of this process. A substantial body of work indicates that parents are the most important influence in shaping the religious and spiritual lives of children and youth, and they are crucial for the transmission of worldviews, both religious and non-religious beliefs, practice and behaviour (see Beit-Hallamy & Argyle 1997; Bengtson et al. 2009, 2013; Chatters & Taylor 2005; Hood et al. 1996: 74; Manning 2015; McIntosh & Spilka 1995; Pollack et al. 2012; Smith et al. 2009, 2014; Smith & Adamzyk 2021).

Previous research has revealed various factors that have been found to be meaningful in religious socialization (Beyer 2018; Davie 2007; Pollack 2008; Pollack et al. 2012, Voas and Doebler 2011; Stolz et al. 2016; Gärtner 2018). More than anything else, previous studies highlight the role of parents and their behaviour and parenting styles. The largest-ever study of religion and family across generations, conducted by Bengtson et al. (2013) in the US, concluded that the pivotal factor in successful religious transmission is the quality of the parent-child relationship and warm and affirming parents, as opposed to distant and remote parents. The results of this study show that the closer the relationship between parent and child, the higher is the similarity between them when it is comes to any of the four dimensions of religion examined in the study: religious intensity, religious behaviour, biblical literalism or civic religiosity. This is the case for all religious traditions in the study; whether a family is Catholic, Mainline Protestant, Evangelical Protestant, Jewish, Mormon or none. (Bengtson et al. 2013). Closeness to the father appears to be particularly important: having a close bond with one’s father appears to be important for the internalization of the parents’ religious tradition, beliefs and practices. This is the case especially for Evangelical Protestants. In general, the results
of the study show in many ways how a distant or non-affirming parent-child relationship – especially with the father – becomes a catalyst for dropping out of religion or turning to another faith (Bengtson et al. 2013). The importance of family relationships is also true for families in the US with no religious affiliation (Bengtson et al. 2013; Manning 2015).

Many other authors have also explained the success of the intergenerational transmission of faith by pointing to the importance of a positive relationship between parents and their children, and there is some evidence that these results correspond to findings in other countries, e.g. findings for West Germany, showing that, since the 1970s, the generative and nurturing quality in families has become considerably stronger, while at the same time the passing on of the religious tradition has decreased. The extent to which children are recognized as personalities has a positive effect on their ability to show commitment and be oriented to the common good. However, it is not necessarily the case that they continue either their religious faith or their religious practice (Gärtner 2013). Other studies also emphasize that the influence of families depends on whether there is a safe and secure attachment between parents and child, and also on whether there is spousal agreement concerning religion. In conjunction, insecure attachment estranges from religion. (Granquist 1998; Hoge et al. 1982; Kirkpatrick 2005; Zehnder-Grob et al. 2009). Religious like-mindedness of parents, a democratic relationship between parents and children as well as encouragement to ponder values and positive experiences of religiosity and religious communities, all support the transmission of religion (Hoge et al. 1982; Kuusisto 2003; Grob et al. 2009).

Furthermore, earlier studies have indicated a correspondence between models of relationships between self and others and self and God (Granqvist et al. 2007). However, the exact mechanisms of these connections and correlations remain open. In our own previous study in Finnish families, we also found that issues related to safety and closeness were one of the main factors that were pivotal for the success of religious transmission. Other important factors were: whether religion is discussed in the families, whether the structural or experiential elements of religion are emphasized and whether there is flexibility regarding religion. (Tervo-Niemelä et al. 2022).

Previous studies also reveal other factors that are meaningful in religious transmission. One of these is the religious tradition of the family. First of all, having a religious denomination is positively associated with the strength of intergenerational relationships (Steinbach & Silverstein 2020). According to Pollack and Rosta (2017), it is especially theists who attach great importance to bringing up their children religiously, whereas religiously liberal parents
or deists are less likely to transmit their religiosity to their children. Similarly, a study by Smith and Adamczyk (2021) shows that religious transmission is stronger in conservative families than in religiously liberal, moderate or non-religious families. These differences are explained by religious conservative parenting approaches, congregational involvement and more intensive religious socialization – the last factor being the most important. (Smith & Adamczyk 2021) Furthermore, the children of parents with different religious views become less religious than children from families in which there is one shared religion (Bruce 2006), and these children are themselves less likely to transmit their religiosity to the next generation. (Bengtson et al. 2013; Woodhead 2017, 2018). This does not mean, however, that parents with no religious affiliation do not transmit their worldview and values to their children (see Manning 2015).

In this article, we analyze the role of experienced closeness and sense of safety in religious socialization in a European context, in Finland. By sense of safety, we mean an emotion of relative security, a comprehensive psychological experience. It requires ongoing appraisal, closely associated with a person’s awareness and perception (Gilbert et al., 2008; Collins & Guidry 2018). In previous studies, sense of safety has been linked with higher life satisfaction (Tomyn & Cummins 2011) as well as with stronger social bonds (Ben-Arieh & Shimon, 2014; Robinson & Graham, 2020).

Issues related to closeness and safety have been found to be important for religious socialization in many studies, but it remains open what are the exact mechanisms linked to this. Furthermore, most of the previous studies were conducted in the US, where the role of religion is in many ways different from that in Europe and more precisely in Finland. Together with its neighbouring countries (other Nordic countries and Estonia), Finland is one those countries where religious socialization is given least emphasis in Europe (EVS2017). According to the European Values Study 2017, only 7% of Finns mentioned religion as one of the five most important things that children should be encouraged towards. Finland is also one of those countries where religion has been declining rapidly in the 21st century (see e.g. Salomäki et al. 2020), and it is a country where mainline Protestantism has the strongest role. In 2020, 67.7% of Finns belonged to the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Finland is one those countries where each successive postwar generation has been on average less religious than the previous generation. More and more people are entering adulthood with little or no religion to lose (Beyer 2018; Davie 2007; Gärtner 2016, 2018; Hámiri & Rosta 2013; Müller 2013; Pollack 2008; Stolz et al. 2016; Voas and Doebler 2011).
3 Data and Method

We used mixed methods approach to answer our research question. Our data consist of both qualitative and quantitative data. The data are part of the international data collected in the research project *The transmission of religion across generations: a comparative international study of continuities and discontinuities in family socialization*, funded by the John Templeton Foundation.¹ In this project, we investigate how religion is transmitted across generations in five countries: Finland, Canada, Germany, Hungary and Italy. Each country is sufficiently different to the others with regard to religious landscape. Finland represents the country with a dominant Lutheran Church.

The quantitative study is based on a representative population survey of 8404 respondents in five countries. In Finland, 1500 persons participated in the survey, which was carried out by NorStat. In this article, we are mainly focusing on the Finnish data, but also comparing Finnish respondents with respondents from the four other countries.

In addition to the quantitative data, we conducted in-depth family interviews in 17 Finnish families. We conducted both family interviews in which at least one member of each generation was present at the same table, as well as individual interviews with family members who could not participate in the family interview. In total, we interviewed 71 individuals. The families were of various religious backgrounds: Lutheran and Orthodox Christians, members of the Pentecostal Church, confessional church and revivalist movements, humanists and atheists. We also had interviewees belonging to the church but not believing in God, as well as participants who were believers not belonging to the church. Our aim was to interview families from very different backgrounds, both from the rural areas and city centres and from all over Finland. Selection of the interviewees followed three criteria: 1) the families were Finnish, 2) three generations participated in the interview, and 3) the member of the youngest generation was at least 15 years old.

We started every family interview with the following question: “We are interested in how you have passed on values, beliefs and in general what is important to you, from one generation to the next and what has changed in this process over time. Can you tell us what it is like in your family?” Most of the families talked about the religious transmission very openly after this first question. However, we had an interview guide which we used if the

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interviewees did not talk unprompted. We also used a visual method in the interviews. The interviewees were asked to draw a picture of their family members and close relatives that have had a significant role in the religious transmission. Additionally, we collected socio-demographic data (such as births, educational trajectories, marriage/divorce, religious orientation and change etc.) and created genograms (family trees) for each family (see Bengtson et al. 2013, 14; Hildenbrand 1999, 86). The qualitative family interviews took 2–4 hours.

Our analysis moved from qualitative analysis to quantitative and then back to the qualitative. We began with a data-driven content analysis of the qualitative interview material. First, we read the material to find themes which were taken up by the families talking about their religiosity or irreligiosity. We continued to summarize the themes which were found in the material into 28 themes. Genograms were also made for each family. Then we went back to the quantitative data to look for material related to this theme. We asked whether the results of the quantitative part of our study supported our qualitative findings. Thus, the direction of our analysis was from qualitative to quantitative and then back to qualitative. Our quantitative analysis consisted of cross-tabulations and comparisons of the differences between means.

In the following, we present our findings concerning the themes of safety and closeness. When referring to the interviewees, G1 (generation 1) means the grandparents’ generation, G2 the parents and G3 the youngest generation. We refer to the participants using pseudonyms, in order to protect their anonymity.

4 Results

Our key result is that when it comes to religious socialization, safety and closeness versus insecurity and severity are experienced broadly in the lives of children, and they are important factors on various levels. Safety and closeness are not only important in terms of the parent-child relationship, but also in relation to religion more broadly: how religious institutions are present in the family and in the lives of children and what is the content of religion and spirituality in the family in terms of safety and closeness. The key levels where safety and closeness are important in religious socialization are: 1) the atmosphere in families, 2) the atmosphere related to religious communities, and 3) the atmosphere related to one’s own spirituality. This is illustrated in Table 1.

Our family interviews show that an open, safe and warm atmosphere in families and religious communities supports religious continuity. In families,
openness and warmth between parents and children appear for example so that parents share their values with their children, but children have the possibility to choose their own worldview. For example, Matias (F2/G3) reported that “belonging to the group and family is not called into question, even if one rebels and does not meet mom’s and dad’s parenting goals”. There are no conflicts between words and actions in families with a safety atmosphere, whereas discrepancy between words and deeds creates insecurity and emotional loneliness and undermines religious continuity. Additionally, forcing to adopt a
certain worldview and unprocessed – often cross-generational – traumas in the family also weaken continuity.

In some families, creating a safe atmosphere has been a conscious choice. Heikki, the grandfather of a religiously very active family, told that he and his wife made a decision that they wanted to create a safe atmosphere between parents and children: “We systematically agreed with my wife that we would not be intimidating by faith. Hell is not intimidated. Damnation is not intimidated.” (F12/G1)

On the other hand, if the sense of safety in the family is built very strongly or exclusively on religion, for example belonging or believing in a certain way, the sense of safety can become quite fragile: if religiosity changes or breaks, the sense of safety might be on the line. Joonas tells:

This is what I find problematic in a certain way, that – if the basic security is created through religion when religion should be a supplement. That security should come from somewhere other than religion. If the basic security comes through religion, then when you get a doubting phase, the basic security goes out from under you too. (F6, G3)

According to our quantitative data, family atmosphere was linked to religious socialization in various ways. Family atmosphere was measured by asking the experienced closeness to the mother, father and grandparents when the respondent had been a child. The results show that closeness links with similarity in religiousness. If the parents were experienced as very close, the respondent’s religiousness correlated with her/his mothers’ religiousness at a level of .52*** and with her/his fathers’ religiousness at a level of .57***. If the relationship was distant, the correlation was not statistically significant.

The results show that of the five countries in the quantitative data, the share of respondents who had experienced their parents and grandparents as very close was lowest in Finland. According to the data, family relationships were closest in Italy and Hungary, whereas Canada and Germany were in the middle. The mother was typically perceived as the closest parent. Of the Finnish respondents, 60 percent responded that they had a very close relationship with their mother, 36 percent with their father. Of the grandparents, the mother’s mother was most often experienced as very close (20%), secondly the father’s mother (16%). One in ten had a very close relationship with their mother’s or father’s father. The finding that family relationships are less close in Finland than in other countries is pivotal when trying to find explanations for the rapid decline in religiousness among younger generations in Finland.
Furthermore, the quantitative data show interestingly that religiosity of parents also has a linkage with closeness. Parents who are rated as religious by their children (on a scale 1 to 5 where 1 = not religious at all, 5 = very religious) are perceived as closer than non-religious parents. Among Finns, if the parent was very religious, half of the respondents had a close relationship with that parent (mother: 50% and father: 48%). If the parent was not religious at all, only one in four had a close relationship with that parent (mother: 26% and father: 28%). Similarly, religious grandparents were perceived as slightly closer than non-religious grandparents. These results show that religiousness of a parent tends to bring at least some kind of positive quality to the parent-child relationship. This is supported by a result from the data that children brought up in a religious family also describe their childhood as slightly happier than those brought up in a non-religious family. Of those brought up in a non-religious family, 34 percent responded that they had a very happy childhood, whereas the corresponding figure for those raised in a very religious family was 42 percent.

Additionally, similarity between parents in religiousness supports closeness and continuity. If parents share the same level of religiousness, they are typically perceived as closer than parents who are religiously different. The quantitative data show that the correlation between respondents’ religiousness and parents’ religiousness was .58*** if the father and mother were equally religious, and .35–.39 if they were different. This result was supported by our family interviews: the interview data show that similarity between parents strengthens closeness and creates predictability and safety within the family, which is meaningful for continuity. The quantitative data also show that if parents share a similar religious view, they are also perceived as closer than parents who do not share the same religious view. Parental similarity is especially important for the perceived closeness of the father. If the father was equally religious as the mother, 47% of children perceived him as close, whereas the corresponding figure was 39% if the father was more religious than the mother and 38% if father was less religious. For the mother, the closeness was perceived similarly if the parents were equally religious or the mother was more religious (65–66% perceived the mother as very close), whereas only 51% perceived the mother as very close if father was more religious. This means that in families in which the father is more religious than the mother, parents are typically perceived as less close than in families in which the mother and father are either equally religious – these families are perceived as closest – or the mother is more religious than the father.

From the viewpoint of religious communities, our interview data shows that interviewees who emphasize safety and closeness in religious communities
have a strong attachment to religious institutions. They consider that belonging to the church is important. Some of the interviewees mentioned that it is very important to participate for example in services, Sunday school or different kinds of groups, while some thought it is important to belong even though they do not want to participate in the religious activities. One daughter (G3a) and grandmother (G1) of F4 described that the church is a safe community where they can go any time. Usually, they do not want to go there but they respect the membership and the choice to participate.

Insecurity and severity in religious communities appear as fearing Hell and the end of the world and forcing to believe. Emotions of fear may cause a strong feeling of inadequacy. The oldest generation (G1) talked often about strict rules in religious communities and the experience of sinfulness. Some interviewees had experiences of ridiculous religiosity, involving stern rules and strictness. In childhood, strict rules have often been even a terrifying experience but in adulthood they appear only ridiculous. Grandmother Maire told:

An old pastor was preaching and he said, “you girls there … I can see from your appearance if you have been kissed by a boy.” That was so horrible. And ridiculous. – Anyhow I took it seriously and went to my mother and said, if I die now, I will go to hell? (F7/G1)

Conflicts in religious communities create feelings of unsafety and inadequacy. Some of the interviewees have felt that they are poor believers because they have heard scary sermons about the end of the world. People remember these kinds of experiences usually for decades, even throughout life. The feelings of inadequacy alienate people from religion and religious communities. All kinds of attrition and forcing of religion on people is probable to lead to non-transmission of religion. For example, Santeri talked about “excesses” in his childhood’s religious community:

There were strange phenomena that … so, they forced me to accept religion. It wasn’t enough that I was, how could I say, that I believed in the Bible, and I believed in God, but I had to experience, specifically experience, that I got religion. That now I begin to believe in Jesus … (F12/G3)

It is also notable that strict rules in religious communities do not only affect those who belong to the communities but also people living near them. In our data, strictness is closely linked to Pentecostalism and to Conservative Laestadianism, which is one of the revival movements in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. Maija has lived all her life in Northern Finland, in
the Laestadian area but outside the movement. However, she talks much about Conservative Laestadianism and the rules which are linked to the movement:

And maybe it has been a religious upbringing at home. That we had quite strict rules. We had to be kind and decent. We never contradicted our parents. And then we had all this kind of celebrating Sundays and all. Remember to keep it holy and ... And still sometimes nowadays if I do something ... that oh my goodness, can't I as a pensioner do it some other day than on Sunday? (F10/G1)

The atmosphere in the religious community did not only affect participation in religious events, but also the practice of religion at home. In some families, strictness and insecurity experienced in the community was revealed in the private religious sphere and discourse, but in some families, it affected through the parents’ decision to act in another manner at home, towards their own children:

But the ‘Uncle Arthur’s Bedtime Stories’ affected, and we systematically agreed with my wife in the family that we would not be intimidated by faith. We had the idea that we don't threaten with Hell, we don't threaten with damnation, but we put forward the positive side. (F12)

In our interview data, an individual safe faith and warm image of God supported religiosity and transmission of religion from one generation to the next. Especially many grandmothers called themselves God’s favourite child. Their image of God was very gentle and religiosity was gracious.

Maire told:

I always had such a positive attitude and such a sense of security in my life, ever since I was little, that I was safe and well taken care of – nothing bad would happen – that I had always felt like a kind of Heavenly Father’s darling, that I was always treated with velvet gloves. (G1/F7)

It seems that warm and gentle religiosity is also a good coping mechanism in difficult periods of life. An uncertain relationship with God and comparison to “true believers” cause feelings of unsafety. This also undermines the continuity of religion. For example, Kimmo is a very religious man but at the same time he is not sure that is he connected to God. He says: “My personal, the biggest spiritual question is: How could I get connected with God?” (G2/F7). As for Aune, a
grandmother of F16, she compares herself to “better believers”. She is living in the area of strong tradition of Conservative Laestadianism and she feels that she has a much weaker faith than Laestadians: “Oh, my faith is so weak. I’ve been at their funerals. A priest who is there blessing says: ‘she/he was ripe harvest.’ And I think, good heavens, I’m not ripe harvest. Oh, I’m afraid of death. How could I get strong faith?” Her feeling of weak faith has grown in old age.

5 Discussion

In this article, we have examined how safety and closeness – or the lack of them – affect religious socialization in families. Our key result was that safety and closeness are a major factor in supporting religious continuity, and that they appear and are influential in three dimensions: 1) the atmosphere in families, 2) the atmosphere related to religious communities, and 3) the atmosphere related to one’s own spirituality.

The key finding is supported by earlier research. A warm and safe atmosphere and safe attachment in the family increase religious continuity, and the quality of religiousness (for instance, whether it is safe or insecure) affects the religious socialization. (Kirkpatrick 2005; Zehnder-Grob et al. 2009.) Additionally, as our previous study showed, talking openly in families also creates religious continuity (Spännäri et al. 2022), which supports the case of safety and closeness being instrumental for religious socialization and continuity.

However, the three dimensions found in this study open up novel perspectives into religious socialization. Mainly only the first dimension has been discussed systematically in previous research. For example, the Theory of Intergenerational Religious Momentum: Influences on Youth’s Religious Practices and Beliefs (Bengtson et al. 2013), mentions parent-child relationship quality as a central factor in the development of a child’s religiosity. Similar themes, such as the experienced warmth, openness and tolerance were also highlighted in our results as supporting continuity between parent and child religiosity. But in addition to the relationships in the family, our analysis revealed that safety and closeness are also essential in religious communities, as well as one’s own spirituality and self-relationship.

The second and third dimension are significantly less prominent in earlier literature. As for the dimension of religious communities, previous research emphasizes the agency and freedom of choice as key elements of religious socialization resulting to continuity (see e.g., de Bruin-Wassinkmaat et al 2021, Barrow et al. 2020). We, too, found that emphasis of fear (hell, end of the
world) and strict religiosity, which was found to be both traumatic and ridiculous, undermined continuity. But in addition, we found strong attachment to religious institutions to be a supporting factor for continuity. As for the third dimension – one’s own spirituality – we can align with previous research in stating that safety, closeness and gentle faith generate continuity. For example the study of Granqvist et al. (2007) showed that there is a correspondence between models of relationships between self and God. But interestingly, and not revealed by previous research, our results show that the sense of safety in these different domains was interlinked: the strongest continuity was seen where safety was experienced in all or several of these domains.

Methodologically, our study illustrates how different members of the same family might have different experiences of the religious atmosphere. Whereas some family members might emphasize strong unity and continuity, others might hold unspoken doubts or traumas – perhaps left unspoken due to fear of rejection. Thus, in family interviews should be taken into account that within one family, there are many stories to be discovered, depending on whether the emphasis is on individual choices or shared views in the family. This also highlights one of the limitations of our study: although we interestingly reached the shared narratives in the family with our focus group interview approach, it left largely unveiled the diversity of individual perspectives and possible discrepancies within the family. This also means that even more in-depth studies on the individual religious experience and religious biographies are needed in order to explore the factors promoting and preventing continuity of religiousness.

Our findings suggest several implications both for practice in religious and other communities of existential meaning and for the study of those communities and empirical theologies. First, as sense of safety and openness were found to be crucial for continuity, communities wanting to promote continuity as well as life satisfaction would strongly benefit from practices supporting these features in families. This could be done for example by arranging platforms for families to discuss their religious or other views and also taking into account the diversity of those views in their own activities. Second, as we found several benefits of using family focus groups as a data collection method, our study might encourage other scholars of empirical theology to explore further the possibilities of this approach. We found in our study that using this method offers an outlook to the dynamics of meaning-making in families, and offers the family an opportunity to discuss their views in an atmosphere in which openness and understanding are encouraged. Supporting laypersons and families in their discussions and meaning-making is not without value for any research project in empirical theology.
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