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ABSTRACT

Recent studies suggest intergenerational religious transmission varies in migrant communities depending on the status of religion in the countries of origin and destination. This article examines whether the children of churchgoing Asian-born migrants living in Australia were more likely to attend church than their counterparts from Australian-born families or European/North American migrant families. Data on 108,933 children were derived from the responses of 89,756 parents in 2,860 different congregations who took part in the Australian National Church Life Survey in 2021. Adult children (ages 19–40) of Asian-born parents were 1.5 times more likely to attend church than the children of Australian-born parents. They were also more likely to attend than the children of European-/North American-born parents, suggesting it was not migration *per se* which was associated with high religious transmission. The differences persisted after accounting for higher co-residence rates among adult children of Asian backgrounds. The difference between the children of Asian migrants and other groups was most marked among Catholics, Anglicans, and those attending the Uniting Church, but less so among other Protestant denominations.

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Asian migrants; Christian churches; intergenerational religious transmission; National Church Life Survey; secularisation

Introduction

Secularisation of societies, especially in the West, has been monitored in detail by sociologists over many decades. National surveys of religious affiliation and/or attendance among different birth cohorts in Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States have all shown broadly similar trends: religiosity is fairly stable over the lifetime of each cohort, but each successive generation tends to be less religious than its predecessor (Voas and Chaves 2016, 1531). Although the patterns vary from country to country, the overall conclusion is that the transmission of Christian religion from one generation to the next is steadily declining, even in the United States, which has often been considered an exception to the secularisation rule. In Australia, self-reported religious service attendance among adult Australians declined from 44% of the population in 1950 to 16% in 2016, while estimates of weekly church attendance (all ages) based on head counts and church reports

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decreased from approximately 1.9 million in 1991 to 1.6 million in 2016, representing a decline from 11% to 7% of the total Australian population over the 25-year period (Powell, Sterland, and Pepper 2020, 16).

In these circumstances, there has been a lot of interest in how people are, or are not, socialised into religion during childhood and early adulthood. This article builds on a study of the Australian National Church Life Survey (NCLS) data from 2001, which examined the effects of parents and grandparents on the likelihood of children attending church (Voas and Storm 2012). The present study uses NCLS data from 2021 to examine whether one characteristic of such parents, namely their region of origin, could influence the transmission of religion to their children. We do this by asking whether the children of first-generation Asian migrants are more or less likely to attend church in adult life than the children of parents born in Australia or other Western countries.

Migration in Australia

Migration has been central in shaping Australia, fluctuating according to social policy, economic demand, and most recently the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Anderson 2013; Jupp 2002; Mansouri 2023). Over the last 20 years, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) recorded net overseas migration as an average of approximately 220,000 a year, but with a massive fluctuation during and after the pandemic (ABS 2023a). Immigration has shaped the structure of society: in 1893, the proportion of the population born overseas was around 30%; it fell steadily to 10% by 1947 but rose to 31% in 2023 (ABS 2023b). As Australia becomes politically and economically more closely tied to the Asian Pacific region (Jupp 1995), Asian immigration is increasing rapidly, replacing the historically dominant intake from the British Isles. Between 1996 and 2023, the proportion born in the British Isles decreased from 6.7% to 4.7%, while the proportion born in Asia increased from 5.1% to 14.1% (ABS 2023c). Those born in England are the largest single group born overseas, but this peaked at just over 1 million people in 2013 and has since declined to 962,000 in 2023, a decline from 4.4% to 3.6% of the population. The proportion born in India rose from 1.6% to 3.2% over the same period and the proportion born in China rose from 1.9% to 2.5% (ABS 2023c). Similarly, figures for the top ten source countries for annual settler arrivals show that, whereas India was the only Asian country to make the list in the 1960s, by 2023, Asia accounted for seven of the top ten source countries (in descending order): India, China, the Philippines, Nepal, Vietnam, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, with the United Kingdom ranking fifth (DHA 2023).

The role of parents in religious socialization

There is a lot of evidence to suggest that children of highly religious parents are more likely to be religious than children of less religious parents (for a summary review of current literature, see Stolz et al. 2024, online supplement appendix). This is partly because non-religious parents rarely have religious children (Voas and Crockett 2005, 20–21), while religious parents more often have religious children. The link between parent and child religiosity emerges in population surveys in different ways: from

respondents' reports on their own religiosity and that of their parents or their children and from longitudinal studies following individuals over time.

Quantitative surveys and qualitative studies of families have identified factors associated with higher or lower religious transmission rates. Families where both parents are religious tend to have more religious children (Voas and Storm 2012, 387), as do stable families and those with religious grandparents (Bengtson, Putney, and Harris 2014; Copen and Silverstein 2008; Voas and Storm 2012). Lower transmission is associated with parents who are not religious, parents who are of different religions (McPhail 2019) or where one or both parents have been divorced (Copen and Silverstein 2008, 59; Uecker and Ellison 2012).

The association of religious children having religious parents implies a role for parents in fostering religion. This is generally assumed to be linked with the way that parents transmit worldviews and behaviours to their children. It may be things done or said in the home or because children are raised in the same wider cultural context as their parents. In her study some decades ago of Mormons in the United States, Marie Cornwall (1988) explored the roles of parents, church, and peers in promoting personal or institutional religiosity. She argued that parental influence through the family might operate directly and indirectly. So, although a person's personal religiosity (traditional orthodoxy, spiritual commitment, frequency of personal prayer) was directly correlated with family religious practices, institutional religiosity (particularistic orthodoxy, church commitment, frequency of church attendance) was influenced mainly by church groups and peers. However, family practices determined exposure to church and religious peers. Close-knit families where parents and children share the same religious social networks may have more intergenerational transmission of shared religion compared with those where children have more freedom to explore a range of cultures with peers.

A recent study of over 8,000 parent–child pairs using four cohorts from the German Socio-Economic Panel found that rates of religious transmission were largely independent of parental attributes, apart from families where there was divorce or separation (Stolz et al. 2024). This suggests that parental influence on child religion is weak in German society, but that may not be true across all cultures. One growing line of investigation examines the place of religion among migrant families, partly because it often forms part of the cultural milieu that they bring with them into their new home country. If this is true, we might expect differences between children that are related to where their parents were born. Patterns created by particular family environments early in life may persist into adulthood and be evident in signs of persistent religious practice later in life. A first step in understanding the role of migration on religious transmission for Christian families in Australia is to see if the children of migrants differ from those of non-migrants and whether differences exist between migrants from different cultures.

Immigrants and religion

The role of religion for migrant families has been widely studied in recent decades, largely because of the way that it can influence integration into the receiving society (Ambrosini, Bonizzoni, and Molli 2021; Bonifacio and Angeles 2010; Kurien 2014). Where the

religion of the migrants and that of the receiving community is shared (for example, when Mexican migrants settle in Catholic communities in the United States), religion can help to form 'bridging' social capital, which fosters ties between indigenous and migrant groups (Allen 2010; Village, Powell, and Pepper 2017, 2020). Where the religion differs, as has been the case for Muslims settling in Western societies, it can foster bonding social capital within migrant groups and heighten ethnic or cultural differences from the receiving society (Foner and Alba 2008).

From the perspective of intergenerational transmission of religion, migration can work in either direction. The children of migrants settling in more secular cultures from their country of origin can shed the religion of their parents as they integrate with peers in more secular societies (Fleischmann and Khoudja 2023, 168). Christians moving to largely secular post-Christian cultures can sometimes show reduced transmission to following generations (Ricucci 2021, 35–49). On the other hand, religion can become more important for second-generation migrants than for their parents, especially for some Muslims moving to the West, where Islam offers ways of claiming or asserting a migrant identity that is distinct from the surrounding culture (Timol 2020, 341–344). A recent study in Italy (Molteni and Dimitriadis 2021, 1485) suggests that religious transmission to second-generation migrants depends on the relationship between the religious context of origin and destination countries. Christian migrants settling in Italy from a religious country such as Romania tend to have higher transmission than migrants from a more secular country like Albania, who tend to have lower transmission rates reflective of their country of origin.

For Christian migrant families arriving in Australia, the situation may likewise vary based on country of origin. As fewer people identify as Christian in Europe, North America, and Australia, religion becomes detached from cultural or ethnic identity. Christian migrants from Western cultures are likely to have transmission rates similar to Australian Christians. However, transmission rates for Asian migrants might be higher than for Western migrants. Although Asian cultures vary, many tend to set a high priority on the closeness of family and filial piety (Quah 2008; Williams 2000). Researchers have drawn a distinction between Western societies that prize individualism and independence and Asian societies that prize collectivism and interdependence. Although this distinction has been questioned on political and empirical grounds (Jenco 2013; Kim 2010), it is widely thought to have some influence on parenting (Fung, Wong, and Park 2018, 471–472; Ng and Wang 2019). While the stereotype of the 'Asian Tiger mother' (Chua 2011) may be overstated (Juang, Qin, and Park 2013), there are studies that suggest that Asian parents may be more controlling of their children and that this might extend to religion. A study in Canada of South Asian immigrant mothers found that participants saw character formation as a key goal of parenting. This was largely about passing on their own internalised values to their children, including adherence to religion (Maiter and George 2003, 423).

Transmission of religious practice may depend on a variety of other factors, some of them related to other characteristics of parents (such as their personal levels of commitment) and some related to the nature of the churches that families attend. Denominations that stress a personal and individual commitment to faith may show less difference in offspring attendance between parents of different migrant

backgrounds than those where belonging and attending are more strongly related to cultural and family ties.

Using these ideas, we theorise that the children of Asian Christian parents may be more likely to attend church later in life than those born either in Australia or in Western countries, where families may generally exert less influence on their children. When looking at parents who are attending church (as is the case in the NCLS studies), the differences are only likely to become apparent once children become more independent in early adolescence. Young children often have to attend church if their parents are there or if there is no one to look after them at home. Once they can be left unsupervised, they may have more choice, and it is then that any differences between families may be seen to exert an influence on attendance at church. If migration *per se* leads to greater transmission of religion among Christian families, we would expect greater attendance of second-generation migrants compared to those with Australian-born parents, but no difference between migrants from different regions of the world. If there are differences, these might indicate an influence of family culture on religious attendance later in life.

Hypotheses

The 2021 NCLS asked churchgoing parents whether or not their children (up to a maximum of five) were attending church. Questions about country of birth enabled the identification of first-generation migrants and their country of origin. Using this dataset, we tested three hypotheses related to the church attendance of the offspring of church attenders in Australia:

(1) children of parents who migrated from Asia will generally be more likely to attend church than those with parents who were born in Australia or Europe or North America.
(2) Any differences will emerge when children have autonomy in deciding whether to go to church.
(3) Differences between the children of Asian migrants and others will vary across different denominations.

Method

Sampling procedure

The NCLS, run by "NCLS Research", is a five-yearly survey of hundreds of thousands of churchgoers in approximately 20 Australian Christian denominations (Catholic, Anglican, Other Protestant). During a given survey period, thousands of participating congregations (parishes in the case of Catholic churches) ask their attendees aged 15 years and over to complete a confidential four-page survey form, mainly comprising questions about demographics, Christian faith and practice, and church health. The primary "Attender Survey", along with variants, is available in multiple languages and in both paper and online format.

NCLS Research collaborates with Australian denominational contacts to maintain a comprehensive list of congregations in most denominations, with some exceptions, such as the Orthodox and independent churches. Approaches to recruitment and sampling for the NCLS vary across the denominations, including random, purposive, and convenience sampling. For example, in most survey waves, including 2021, Catholic parishes have been randomly sampled, the Lutheran Church has aimed for full participation by all congregations, and Pentecostal congregations have tended to opt in, with encouragement from their national leaders. The 2021 NCLS occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Philanthropic funding was provided to assist with the recruitment of congregations across the full spectrum of denominations. The goal was to achieve a viable national profile of basic survey results across churches in Australia during this period of disruption. In addition to denominations' own recruitment approaches, randomly selected churches across all denominations had their participation costs funded.

Australia's governments pursued strong public health measures in response to the pandemic, including stay-at-home orders and restrictions on gatherings. The 2021 NCLS, which received ethics clearance from Charles Sturt University (Ref: H21355) and commenced in late 2021, was therefore extended well into 2022 to maximise the participation of churches as they returned to physical gatherings. Ultimately, over 128,000 churchgoers in more than 2,800 congregations took part, with some 43% of individuals completing the survey online. Participation in the survey was informed, voluntary, anonymous, and confidential. Consent to participate was implied through participation in the survey. Catholics and Pentecostals were under-represented, whereas Protestants from other denominations, especially Anglicans and Lutherans, were over-represented. Participation in the NCLS tends to be biased towards larger churches and, despite the availability of surveys in multiple languages, non-English language churches are under-represented (Pepper et al. 2018, 195–196).

Creating the sample for this analysis

The original dataset was based on 128,259 respondents in congregations who fully or partially completed the survey. One section of the questionnaire was headed "About your children" and started by asking "How many children do you have (who are still living)?", with six responses ranging from "None" to "5 or more". Three questions were then asked about each child (up to a maximum of five children): their age, whether or not they lived at home, and whether or not they attended church regularly (with responses: "Yes, here", "Yes, somewhere else, same denomination", "Yes, at another denomination", "No", "Don't know"). The last item was used to create the binary dependent variable "Child attends" (1 = Yes, 0 = No), with "Don't know" set to missing value.

The number of children for which information was reported did not always correspond to responses about the number of children (who were still living). A new variable "Number of children reported on" (range 1–5) was therefore used instead as a measure of the number of children and a proxy of family size.

The analysis was based on children, rather than parents, so the data were restructured by creating a record for each child whose attendance, age, and living status were reported by parents. In some cases, both parents were present when the survey was distributed,

flagged by the question "Do you have a spouse or partner who is also completing a survey form here?" To avoid duplication, it was necessary to remove cases where both partners reported data on the same children. An algorithm matched individuals from the same congregation who reported a spouse or partner present and where the number and ages of children reported were identical. Data from one of the partners (randomly chosen) were then excluded from the analysis. In 119 cases (mainly people with one child aged one) it was not possible to be sure if there was duplication, but such cases accounted for only a tiny fraction of the sample.

The restructured dataset consisted of 214,628 children with known attendance reported from 89,756 parents in 2,860 different congregations. The final sample was then selected using the following criteria:

(1) no duplicate reporting of the same children by spouse or partner
(2) exclude parents whose region of birth was not Australia, Europe or North America or Asia (China/Hong Kong, Korea, Vietnam, the Philippines, India/Sri Lanka, Other Asian) or whose migrant status was unknown or unclear
(3) exclude parents not attending one of the main denomination groups used in the study (Anglican, Baptist, Uniting Churches, Lutheran, Other Protestant, Catholic)
(4) exclude parents less than 15 years older than their youngest child (to exclude likely stepchildren)
(5) exclude children more than 50 years old (too few in sample over this age)
(6) exclude parents attending congregations that returned less than 11 questionnaires (to avoid unreliable estimates for aggregated congregational-level variables)
(7) no missing data for the parent variables used in analysis

The profile of the final sample is shown in Table 1. More details about the selection process and sample size at each stage are included in Table A1 (see Appendix). Comparisons between the final sample and the sample before excluding missing values listwise are given in Table A2 (see Appendix).

Analysis

The data were structured in three levels because children were nested in parents and parents nested in congregations:

Level 1 (child) variables were: attends church (the dependent variable), age group (0–12, 13–18, 19–25, 26–40, >40), lives at home. Unlike parental age, age of children was treated categorically because childhood years represent changes in maturation that are likely to influence attendance (parent-dependent children, more independent teenagers, young adulthood).

Level 2 (parent) variables were: age in years, years lived in Australia (= age for Australian-born parents), attends church at least once a month, number of children reported (1–5), Education (1 = Primary school, 2 = Secondary school, 3 = Trade certificate, 4 = Diploma, 5 = Bachelor degree, 6 = Postgraduate degree), frequency of daily prayer or devotions (1 = Never, 2 = Hardly ever, 3 = Occasionally, 4 = Weekly, 5 = A few times a week, 6 = Daily), attending with spouse/partner, region of birth (Australia, Europe or North America, Asia).

Table 1. Profile of final sample.

	N =	Final sample 108933 %
Child attends	Yes	54.2
	No	45.8
Child age	0–12	18.1
	13–18	10.9
	19–25	11.9
	26–40	32.4
	>40	26.7
Child lives at home	Yes	39.3
	No	60.7
Denomination	Anglican	32.2
	Baptist	16.4
	Uniting Churches	10.3
	Lutheran	8.0
	Other Protestant	18.0
	Roman Catholic	15.2
Parent age	15–29yrs	0.4
	30–49yrs	24.2
	50–69yrs	44.5
	70 + yrs	30.9
Attends at least monthly	Yes	95.6
	No	4.4
Attending with spouse	Yes	62.3
	No	37.7
Parent region of Birth	Australia	76.5
	Europe /North America	11.2
	Asia	12.4
Other language at home	Yes	12.7
	No	87.3

Level 3 (congregation) variables were based either on data assigned on collection (e.g. denomination of congregation) or on responses from all congregants who completed questionnaires. They were: denomination group (Anglican, Baptist, Uniting Churches, Lutheran, Other Protestant, Catholic), congregation size (number of completed questionnaires as a proxy measure), mean age of congregants, mean education level of congregations, percentage of congregation born in Asia, percentage attending at least monthly, mean frequency of personal prayer.

Initial exploration suggested data of migrants from different Asian countries were sufficiently similar to be combined, as were data from migrants from Europe and North America (see Appendix, Table A3). Grouping by region made analysis and interpretation easier and differences between countries within regions were smaller than differences between regions.

A multi-level binary logistical model was created using the Generalized Linear Mixed Models (GENLINMIXED) procedure in SPSS 29 (IBM_SPSS 2023). Binary logistic regression is suitable for testing binary dependent variables such as whether a child attends or does not attend church. A multi-level model allows for the nesting of data; in this study, parents could have more than one child (children in the same family were thus not statistically independent) and parents were grouped in churches (parents from the same church were thus not statistically independent).

Analysis was in two main stages. The main aim of the first stage was to identify which fixed effects (at child, parent or congregation level) predicted whether or not a child attended church. This included all ages of children in the model and tested main effects plus a series of interactions that tested whether the effects on attendance of the age of child and the parent denomination group varied with the region of birth of the parent. The second stage of analysis looked at the attendance of adult children aged 19–40, to see if trends were also present in this group and to examine the effects of living in the parental home.

Results

All ages of children

The main effects for the linear logistic regression model for children of all ages are shown in Table 2, where the coefficient *B* represents the log odds ratio between a category and the reference category or for a one-unit change for continuous variables. A negative value implies a lower probability of attending compared with the reference category, while a positive value indicates a higher probability of attending. The exponentiation of the coefficient (Exp(*B*)) is the odds ratio, where numbers less than one imply a reduced

Table 2. Multilevel binary logistical regression of child attends.

Level	Fixed effect	Category	*B*	SE(*B*)	*t*	Exp(*B*)	
	Intercept		1.254	0.307	4.085	3.504	
1: Child	Age of child (0-12)	13–18	-1.513	0.048	-31.606	0.220	***
		19–25	-2.638	0.052	-50.821	0.071	***
		26–40	-2.587	0.061	-42.621	0.075	***
		>40	-2.380	0.070	-34.121	0.093	***
	Lives at home (No)	Yes	0.528	0.028	18.576	1.695	***
2: Parent	Age		-0.013	0.002	-6.178	0.987	***
	Years in Australia		-0.003	0.002	-2.145	0.997	*
	Number children reported		0.048	0.010	4.776	1.049	***
	Education		0.063	0.008	8.413	1.065	***
	Attends at least monthly (No)	Yes	0.607	0.058	10.436	1.835	***
	Prayer frequency		0.162	0.008	19.901	1.175	***
	Attending with spouse (No)	Yes	0.882	0.021	42.663	2.416	***
	Region of birth (Australia)	Europe /NA	-0.232	0.044	-5.228	0.793	***
		Asia	0.365	0.068	5.359	1.440	***
	Other language at home (No)	Yes	0.371	0.047	7.870	1.449	***
3: Congregation	Denomination (Catholic)	Anglican	0.450	0.038	11.757	1.569	***
		Baptist	0.599	0.041	14.455	1.820	***
		Uniting Churches	0.245	0.044	5.532	1.277	***
		Lutheran	0.570	0.046	12.281	1.768	***
		Other Protestant	0.556	0.043	12.943	1.744	***
	Congregation size (11-35)	>146	0.187	0.035	5.367	1.206	***
		70-146	0.145	0.031	4.740	1.156	***
		36-69	0.058	0.029	1.997	1.060	*
	Mean age		-0.029	0.003	-11.356	0.971	***
	Percent born in Asia		-0.003	0.001	-3.492	0.997	***
	Mean education		-0.107	0.023	-4.684	0.899	***
	Percent with children <13		0.002	0.001	1.791	1.002	*
	Percent with teenagers		0.002	0.002	1.079	1.002	NS
	Percent attending monthly+		0.015	0.002	6.712	1.015	***

Note: for fixed effects categorical variables, reference category in parentheses. NA = North America. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; NS Not significant.

probability of attending, one implies an equal chance of attending, and numbers greater than one an increased chance of attending.

Child effects

The probability of children attending was significantly lower for all age categories compared with children under 13. Estimated marginal means (Table A4, Appendix) showed a 90% probability of attending for children aged 0–12, falling to 67% among teenagers, 41% among adults aged 26–40, and 46% of those aged 41–50. Young children of parents who attend church are likely to have to attend as they cannot be left unattended at home. Plotting attendance against actual age showed it remained above 90% until the age of 13 and fell sharply during teenage years to 66% at the age of 18. Older children may have more choice in staying at home and this may explain the decline in teenagers. Among children of parents attending church, some 40% of those aged 19–40 were attending church somewhere. The probability of attending was some 1.7 times higher if the child was living at home, after allowing for the age of the child (Table 2).

Parent effects

The chances of attendance were significantly higher for the children of parents who were younger, who had larger families, who had higher education levels, who attended their church at least monthly, and who prayed or performed personal devotions more frequently. Having both spouses attending had one of the largest effects: parents attending church with their spouse or partner were twice as likely to report that their children also attended church compared to those who were attending alone. These results suggest that, even within a sample of churchgoing adults, variations in parental religious commitment and socio-demographic factors had significant effects on whether or not their children were likely to attend.

Compared to parents born in Australia, parents who were born in Europe or North America were 1.3 (1/0.793) times less likely to report that their children attended, while parents born in Asia were 1.4 times more likely to do so. This implies that it was not immigrant status *per se* that may enhance the attendance of offspring, but more specifically being a migrant from an Asian country. Parents who reported a language other than English spoken at home (alongside English or as the only language) were 1.4 times more likely to report children attending church than those who only spoke English at home.

Is the effect of Asian parents on child attendance seen among all ages of children or is it only evident when children become adults? Results showed a significant interaction on child attendance between region of birth of parent and child age group (Figure 1). The proportion of children aged 0–12 attending was little different between those who had Australian-born parents (91%) or Asian-born parents (87%). However, for children aged 19–25, the equivalent figures were 37% versus 45% and, for children aged over 40, the equivalent figures were 41% versus 60%. The difference between children of parents born in Asia versus those of parents born in Australia or Europe/North America seems to emerge among teenagers and persists through later life.

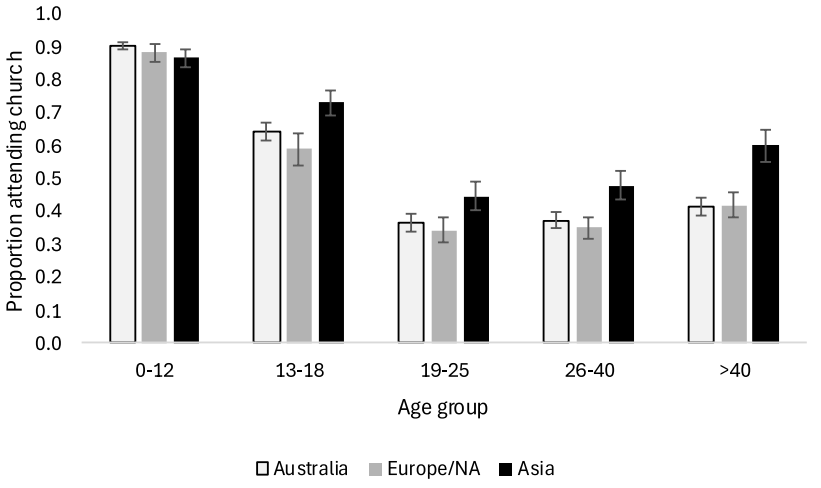

Figure 1. Estimated marginal means for attendance of child by age group and region of birth of parent.

Note: error bars are 95% CL.

Congregational effects

The characteristics of congregations which parents attended also have some predictive power on child attendance. Compared with Catholics, the children of all other denominational groups were more likely to attend, although the difference was greatest between Catholics and Baptists and least between Catholics and those attending Uniting Churches (Table 2). Parents from congregations in the upper two quartiles of size tended to be slightly more likely to report attending children than those in the lowest quartile. There were negative correlations with mean age, education level, and percent born in Asia. At parental level, the effect for education and percent born in Asia was positive, suggesting that Asian parents in predominately non-Asian congregations may be more likely to report attending children than Asian parents in predominately Asian congregations. It is possible, however, that there is a restricted range in the sample due to the relatively low participation of non-English language congregations.

Adult children

To examine factors that predicted attendance of adult children, the analysis was restricted to the 48,263 children aged 19–40, 43.3% of whom were reported as attending church. The factors predicting attendance were similar to the whole sample (child age group was excluded from the analysis), although parental attendance was no longer significant (Table 3). This showed that the effects of region of birth, whether or not the child lives at home, and speaking another language in the home were effects associated with attendance not only as children but also later in life. Living at home was much more likely for the adult children of Asian-born children (46%) compared with parents born in Australia (20%) or in Europe/North America (18%). Even after controlling for this, however, adult children of Asian-born parents still were 1.5 times more likely to attend than the children of Australian-born parents. Estimated marginal means for main effects are shown in Table A5 (Appendix).

Table 3. Multilevel binary logistical regression of child attends for children aged 19–40.

Level	Fixed effect	Category	*B*	SE(*B*)	*t*	Exp(*B*)	
		Intercept	-0.367	0.388	-0.946	0.693	
1: Child	Lives at home (No)	Yes	0.443	0.028	15.619	1.557	***
2: Parent	Age		-0.008	0.003	-2.837	0.992	***
	Number of children reported		-0.004	0.002	-1.880	0.996	***
	Years in Australia		0.036	0.013	2.794	1.037	
	Education		0.050	0.010	5.259	1.052	***
	Attends at least monthly (No)	Yes	0.128	0.069	1.849	1.136	NS
	Prayer frequency		0.162	0.011	15.202	1.176	***
	Attending with spouse (No)	Yes	0.847	0.027	31.550	2.332	***
	Region of birth (Australia)	Europe /NA	-0.291	0.058	-5.003	0.748	***
		Asia	0.390	0.087	4.477	1.477	***
	Other language at home (No)	Yes	0.318	0.060	5.340	1.375	***
3: Congregation	Denomination (Catholic)	Anglican	0.596	0.051	11.756	1.815	***
		Baptist	0.723	0.053	13.578	2.061	***
		Uniting Churches	0.283	0.060	4.732	1.327	***
		Lutheran	0.595	0.061	9.696	1.814	***
		Other Protestant	0.717	0.055	12.977	2.048	***
	Congregation size (11–35)	>146	0.204	0.044	4.595	1.226	***
		70–146	0.147	0.040	3.718	1.159	***
		36–69	0.065	0.038	1.703	1.067	NS
	Mean age		-0.035	0.003	-10.776	0.966	***
	Percent born in Asia		-0.002	0.001	-2.577	0.998	**
	Mean education		-0.116	0.029	-3.953	0.891	***
	Percent with children <13		-0.001	0.002	-0.696	0.999	NS
	Percent with teenagers		0.000	0.002	-0.090	1.000	NS
	Percent attending monthly+		0.014	0.003	4.838	1.014	***

Note: N = 48,263. For explanation, see Table 2.

Are these patterns of difference in adult offspring attendance repeated in the same way across denominations? Results showed a significant interaction between parental birth region and denomination group, with different patterns across denominations (Figure 2).

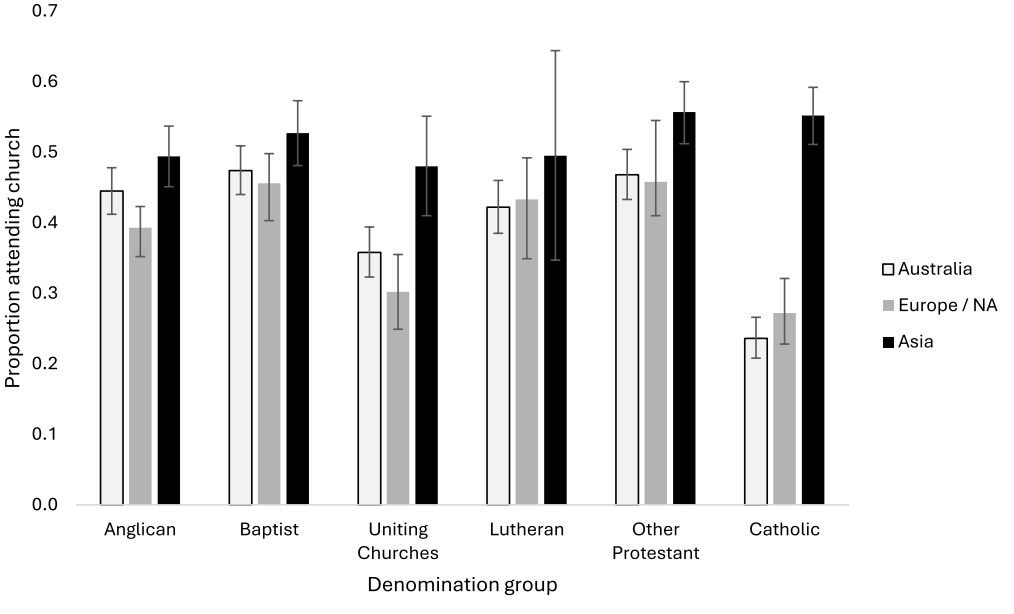

Figure 2. Estimated marginal means (95% CL) for attendance of child by denomination group and region of birth of parent for children aged 19–40.

Among Baptists, for example, the adult children of Australian-born parents were as likely to attend as those with Asian-born parents (47% versus 50%). For Catholics, the adult children of Australian-born parents were much less likely to attend (24%) than those of Asian-born parents (53%). Significant differences between Asian migrant families and others were evident among Catholics, Anglicans, and those attending the Uniting Churches, but, among Baptists, Lutheran or Other Protestants, the trends were apparent but not statistically significant. This means it is difficult to generalize across denominations about the effects of Asian-born parents on the attendance of their children in later life.

Discussion

This article examined the influence of parental region of origin on the church attendance of 108,933 children reported by 89,756 churchgoing parents from 2,860 different congregations in the 2021 NCLS in Australia. In confirmation of our hypotheses, we found that the children of Asian-born migrants were more likely to attend church than those born in Australia or in Europe/North America and that the difference emerged among teenagers and persisted through later life. However, this difference was not apparent to the same degree across all denominations.

As found in many other studies, attendance declined with age. In this sample, after allowing for other factors, there was a 90% chance of children under 13 attending, a 67% chance of teenagers attending, and less than a 50% chance thereafter. The teenage decline may represent growing independence, with attendance falling sharply from 91% for 13-year-olds to 66% for 18-year-olds. In Australia, there is no legal age at which children can be left on their own; this is left to parental judgement. Other reasons why attendance of children declines from 13 to 19 years of age are likely to include competition from sporting activities or increased demands for homework. However, there were no data in the survey to test the reasons for the decline; further work would be needed to explore this phenomenon. Among adult children, there is a steady decline from 61% for 19-year-olds to 37% for 40-year-olds. While not strictly representative of the Australian churchgoing population as a whole, as expected, the figures for the children of churchgoing adults are significantly higher than attendance rates in the general population, with the latter estimated to be under 20% (Powell, Sterland, and Pepper 2020, 9–10). The overall results of this survey are roughly comparable with those of the 2001 NCLS, where parents reported that around 40% of their children in their 20s to 50s attended (Voas and Storm 2012, 386), compared to 39% in 2021.

The multivariate analyses led to five main conclusions.

Firstly, parental religiosity predicted whether or not their children would attend both as children and later in life. Children whose parents attended at least monthly and who prayed more frequently were more likely to attend themselves. Having both parents attending was a particularly strong predictor of child attendance, even for adult children, something which was noted in the 2001 NCLS (Voas and Storm 2012, 387). These findings echo similar results in studies that included both churchgoing and non-churchgoing parents and show that, even among those who attend church, variations in parental religiosity can predict the churchgoing habits of their children.

Secondly, other characteristics of parents predicted churchgoing in children. Children of younger and more educated parents and those from larger families were more likely to attend, although these effects were small compared with having two parents attending. A recent study of parent–child attendance in the general population of West Germany from 1984 to 2018 found that parental effects were small or non-existent (Stolz et al. 2024, 821–824). The study did find more religious transmission among more educated parents, but this was not in the direction expected by secularisation theory. The present study of just churchgoers was not equivalent to the general population, but there is clearly scope for investigating more thoroughly the non-religious contextual factors that might promote churchgoing in successive generations.

Thirdly, some characteristics of the parent congregations predicted the attendance of adult children, even though children may not necessarily have been socialised in that particular congregation if their parents had since changed church. Controlling for other factors, children of Catholic parents were least likely to attend as adults and those of Baptists or those of the Other Protestant group were most likely to attend. Higher transmission among conservative Protestants than among Catholics has been noted in the Netherlands (de Graaf, Need, and Ultee 2004, 90–98) and among more conservative evangelicals in Switzerland (Stolz and Favre 2005, 180). This may reflect a blending of firmness and warmth in parenting styles (Fung, Wong, and Park 2018, 479).

Fourthly, Asian-born parents were generally more likely to have churchgoing children than parents born in either Australia or in Europe/North America. It seemed that migration *per se* was not necessarily a factor and, as suggested by others (Molteni and Dimitriadis 2021, 1498–1501), the transmission patterns of origin countries may be important. The effect of being born in Asia remained even after allowing for the greater propensity of adult children of Asian-born parents to live at home (three times more likely compared to the adult children of other parents). The adult children of Asian-born parents were much more likely to be in a home where a language other than English was spoken (72% versus 3%), but this did not negate the independent effect of having Asian-born parents either. While there were no variables in the dataset to test why parental country of origin affected child attendance, it is likely to be related to differences in family culture and the nature of parenting. The Asian parents in this study came from a range of cultures, but the higher religious transmission rates were seen in all countries of origin compared with Europe/North America. More detailed studies within particular Asian Christian communities would be needed to understand better the forces that shape religious transmission in each.

Fifthly, the difference in churchgoing between the children of parents born in different regions varied between denomination groups, although the trend was apparent in all. The difference between Asian-, European-/North American-, and Australian-born parents was least obvious among Baptists, Lutherans, and Other Protestant denominations and most obvious among Anglicans, those attending Uniting Churches, and Catholics. The former groups tend to have more strongly Protestant views about the personal and individual nature of Christian commitment, which may explain why family difference seems less influential. Writing about South Asian Catholic migrants in the US, Selva Raj (2016, 185–190) suggests that the maintenance of language and ritual is important for this group in efforts to transmit their particular tradition. More detailed work

within denominations would be needed to tease out what factors are at play. A good contrast might be between those attending the Uniting Churches, Baptists, and Catholics.

Limitations

The survey generated large samples from a wide range of denominations. As noted earlier, these were a combination of random, purposive, and convenience samples across different denominations and non-English speaking congregations were under-represented. Self-selection biases operating at church and individual level may have been exacerbated or modified by varying conditions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, unlike other waves of the NCLS, the injection of external funding to remove costs for many congregations may have partially offset some biases. At the individual level, historically, there have been high response rates within churches (Pepper et al. 2018, 196). For this study, where the aim was to examine fine-grained differences in the patterns of attendance of the children of churchgoers rather than to produce overall national statistics, the sample was not weighted. For other studies, issues of representativeness may be partially addressed through weighting results by accounting for the different levels of participation in the NCLS among denominations.

While the large sample enabled this study to include ethnic and denominational diversity, the cross-sectional nature of the data imposes limitations on how the overall results can be interpreted. Factors that may have explained the differences observed, such as the nature of parenting or levels of filial piety, were not assessed in the NCLS. While this study has demonstrated differences between groups, it cannot prove cause and effect nor explain exactly why Asian families are better at resisting the forces of secularisation. This points towards the direction of future studies in this area.

Conclusions

This study confirms the importance of parental religion for the transmission of churchgoing to successive generations but also points to the high transmission among Asian migrant families compared with Western migrant families or families where parents were born in Australia. This difference manifests itself in teenagers and continues into adult life. The difference between denominations may indicate different forces in operation, perhaps between traditions where individual conversion is more central to belonging (as in Baptist churches) and traditions where attendance at worship and affiliation are more important (as in Catholic traditions). More detailed work would be needed to test this idea.

The findings point to the importance of parents and family life in the socialisation of religion among children. Patterns that emerge in teenage years may persist into adult life, so learning from Asian Christian families in Australia may help churches to understand how to counter the general trend of increasing secularisation in the country.

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Note

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Appendix

Table A1. Process of selection of the final sample of children whose attendance was reported by parents.

	Number included	Number excluded	Percent excluded*
Children with known attendance reported by all parents	214628		
Exclude duplicate reporting	199600	15028	
Exclude other regions of birth	154265	45335	22.7%
Exclude other denominations	150048	4217	2.1%
Exclude parents <15 than child	146430	3618	1.8%
Exclude children >50 years old	124359	22071	11.1%
Exclude parents in congregations with <11 returns	120555	3804	1.9%
Exclude missing cases listwise	108933	11622	5.8%

Note: * as a percentage of non-duplicate records

Table A2. Sample profiles before and after excluding missing values listwise.

	N =	With missing data 120555 %	Final sample 108933 %	χ^2	*df*	
Child attends	Yes	54.1	54.2			
	No	45.9	45.8	0.8	1	NS
Child age	0-12	17.8	18.1			
	13-18	10.8	10.9			
	19-25	11.8	11.9			
	26-40	32.3	32.4			
	>40	27.3	26.7	9.6	4	*
Child lives at home	Yes	39.3	39.3			
	No	60.7	60.7	0.0	1	NS
Denomination	Anglican	32.0	32.2			
	Baptist	16.2	16.4			
	Uniting Churches	10.4	10.3			
	Lutheran	7.7	8.0			
	Other Protestant	17.8	18.0			
	Roman Catholic	15.9	15.2	29.4	5	***
Parent age	15-29yrs	0.6	0.4			
	30-49yrs	23.9	24.2			
	50-69yrs	43.3	44.5			
	70 + yrs	32.1	30.9	100.2	3	***
Attends at least monthly	Yes	94.8	95.6			
	No	5.2	4.4	84.2	1	***
Attending with spouse	Yes	61.6	62.3			
	No	38.4	37.7	11.9	1	***
Parent region of Birth	Australia	75.5	76.5			
	Europe /North America	11.5	11.2			
	Asia	13.0	12.4	30.0	2	***
Other language at home	Yes	13.3	12.7			
	No	86.7	87.3	20.1	1	***

Note. * $p < .05$; *** $p < .001$; NS not significant.

Table A3. Percentage of children attending by country of birth of their parent.

Parent country of birth	*N*	% attending
Australia	83285	52.0
United Kingdom/Ireland	7453	41.2
Northern or Western Europe	2179	51.6
Southern Europe	820	40.2
Eastern Europe or Eurasia	417	57.3
North America	1316	63.4
China/Hong Kong	3436	72.7
Korea	438	81.5
Vietnam	306	78.4
Philippines	2382	77.2
India/Sri Lanka	2594	78.8
Other Asia	4307	75.4

Table A4. Estimated marginal means for categorical fixed main effects on probability that child attends church.

					95% CL	
Level	Fixed effect	Category	Mean	SE	LL	UL
1: Child	Age of child	0-12	0.90	0.006	0.89	0.91
		13-18	0.67	0.011	0.65	0.69
		19-25	0.40	0.010	0.38	0.42
		26-40	0.41	0.010	0.39	0.43
		>40	0.46	0.012	0.44	0.48
	Child lives at home	Yes	0.66	0.009	0.64	0.68
		No	0.53	0.011	0.51	0.55
2: Parent	Attends at least monthly	Yes	0.67	0.007	0.66	0.68
		No	0.52	0.016	0.49	0.55
	Attending with spouse	Yes	0.70	0.009	0.68	0.71
		No	0.49	0.010	0.47	0.51
	Region of birth	Australia	0.59	0.009	0.57	0.61
		Europe /NA	0.53	0.013	0.51	0.55
		Asia	0.67	0.014	0.64	0.70
	Other language spoken at home	Yes	0.64	0.012	0.62	0.67
		No	0.55	0.010	0.53	0.57
3: Congregation	Denomination	Anglican	0.61	0.010	0.59	0.63
		Baptist	0.64	0.010	0.62	0.66
		Uniting Churches	0.56	0.012	0.54	0.58
		Lutheran	0.64	0.012	0.61	0.66
		Other Protestant	0.63	0.011	0.61	0.66
		Catholic	0.50	0.012	0.47	0.52
	Congregation size	11-35	0.57	0.011	0.55	0.60
		36-69	0.59	0.011	0.57	0.61
		70-146	0.61	0.010	0.59	0.63
		>146	0.62	0.011	0.60	0.64

Table A5. Estimated marginal means for categorical fixed main effects on probability that child (aged 19–40) attends church.

					95% CL	
Level	Fixed effect	Category	Mean	SE	LL	UL
1: Child	Child lives at home	Yes	0.49	0.013	0.46	0.52
		No	0.38	0.011	0.36	0.40
2: Parent	Attends at least monthly	Yes	0.45	0.009	0.43	0.47
		No	0.42	0.018	0.38	0.46
	Attending with spouse	Yes	0.54	0.012	0.52	0.56
		No	0.33	0.011	0.31	0.36
	Region of birth	Australia	0.43	0.011	0.40	0.45
		Europe /NA	0.36	0.015	0.33	0.39
		Asia	0.52	0.020	0.49	0.56
	Other language spoken at home	Yes	0.47	0.016	0.44	0.51
		No	0.40	0.011	0.37	0.42
3: Congregation	Denomination	Anglican	0.46	0.013	0.44	0.49
		Baptist	0.49	0.014	0.47	0.52
		Uniting Churches	0.39	0.015	0.36	0.42
		Lutheran	0.46	0.016	0.43	0.49
		Other Protestant	0.49	0.014	0.46	0.52
		Catholic	0.32	0.014	0.30	0.35
	Congregation size	11-35	0.41	0.013	0.38	0.44
		36-69	0.43	0.013	0.40	0.45
		70-146	0.45	0.013	0.42	0.47
		>146	0.46	0.014	0.43	0.49