

Asking the clergy: Should children be allowed to choose their own faith?

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Many children attend worship services with their parents, and some even experience their first religious ritual in infancy. This week's clergy discuss whether — and when — children should be able to decide for themselves what faith to follow.

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The job of a parent is to set clear guidelines and limits for a child. This helps the child to feel secure and to know who he or she is and what is acceptable behavior. It is important that children have a clear sense of self. To that end I believe that parents should pick a religion for the children and the household. Even if one of the parents practices a different religion, the choice of what the kids are, should be made for them. Some people choose both, but that has inherent conflicts as many religions have contradictory teachings, even in faiths with similar values. It is better for the adults to make a clear choice even before the kids are born. So that might play out this way: “You are Jewish like Mommy but we are going to help Daddy celebrate Christmas because he is Christian.” Or, “We are going to a Ramadan celebration at your aunt’s house and we will celebrate with them, just like they come to our house to celebrate Passover.” As children grow, they will embrace or reject many of the things their parents have taught them, but that does not give parents the right to abdicate the responsibility of choosing for them from birth to around 18. A child should never be in the position of choosing between Mommy and Daddy; that needs to be a grown-up decision. In a world in which religion is one of the ways we find our path and self-identify, I would never want a child to feel like a “nothing.”