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Young Souls in Transition — Emerging Adults and the Church

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“I mean, I have my beliefs in my head,” the young man said. “But I don’t enjoy the whole religious scene. I’m not really into it like some people are. I have my beliefs, I believe that’s the way it is, and the way it should be, and I go to church every once in a while. But it’s kind of low-key.”

Anyone who knows today’s generation of young adults recognizes that language immediately. It is the language of religious detachment and institutional alienation. But, as the careful observer will quickly recognize, it is not the language of hostile alienation or ideological detachment. It is the language that marks a generation of souls in transition.

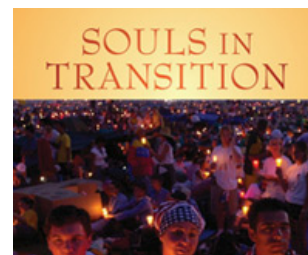


In the early years of this decade, sociologist Christian Smith (then of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) and his colleagues conducted over 3,000 interviews with American adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17. Their massive study of adolescent religion in America was published in 2005 as *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press). That study, now recognized as a landmark in the sociology of religion, found that most American adolescents were not irreligious, did not see themselves in rebellion against their parents, and did not fit the popular designation of the coming religious tenor as being “spiritual but not religious.”

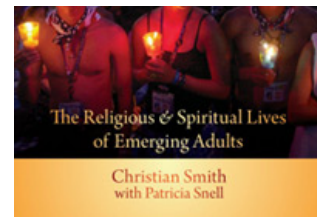
What Smith and his associates did find was that the mainstream belief system of American teenagers took the form of what the team identified as “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” — a faith in a moralistic deity who expects his human creatures to behave, to feel good about themselves, and to run their own lives without too much divine interference or intervention.

In other words, Smith argued that the nation’s teenagers looked and sounded much like their parents and the larger culture. They are vaguely and self-consciously spiritual, engaged in some sense of religious identity, but absolutely committed to the larger cultural ethos of autonomous individualism. Though a fairly significant percentage of these adolescents identified with traditional and even orthodox forms of Christianity, and a much smaller percentage identified with forms of self-conscious unbelief, most placed themselves under the umbrella of the Moralistic Therapeutic Deism that Smith and his team of researchers described so memorably.

Now, less than five years after the publication of *Soul Searching*, Smith and another team of associates are out with another study. In *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford University Press, 2009), Smith, along with Patricia Snell, offers a study based on follow-up interviews with 230 of the same individuals included in the first study. The difference is that these young people were no longer 13-17-year-olds, but were instead ages 18-23. Would the age difference also mean a significant shift in religious practice and beliefs?



As *Souls in Transition* reveals, the answer to that question is both yes and no. In *Soul Searching*, Smith asserted that “American teenagers can embody adults’ highest hopes and most gripping fears.” Indeed, it seems that every generation of teenagers becomes a consuming concern of adults, as well as a target population for sociologists, psychologists, and other researchers. But Smith now argues that the more significant research population- and the more determinative age cohort for the future of American religion — may well be the “emerging adults” of their most recent study.



What to call them? These young people and their life stage have been labeled as “twenty-somethings,” “youthhood,” “adulthood,” and “extended adolescence.” Smith chose to use the term offered by psychologist Jeffrey Arnett — “emerging adulthood.”

“What is it like to be an 18- to 29-year-old in America?” Smith and his team asked. “What are the major strengths and problems of emerging adults today? How are they faring on their journey to full adulthood?” To these questions they added the religious and spiritual dimensions of the generation. Who are they and what do they believe?

In the first place, they really do represent something new in life stage experience. Their emergence into full adulthood is coming, in the main, considerably later than their parents and virtually every earlier generation after the dawn of modernity. Their emergence into adulthood has been delayed by higher education, by the delay of marriage, by economic instability, and by the continued financial support of their parents. Thus, this generation of young adults has experienced “a historically unparalleled freedom to roam, experiment, learn, move on, and try again.”

Following the pattern set by *Soul Searching*, *Souls in Transition* includes profiles of several representative young people. They range from the highly conventional and orthodox to the agnostic and atheistic, but most are clustered into a far more ambiguous mediating category.

What has changed since their teenage years? Perhaps the most significant impression presented in the project is that these young adults have distanced themselves from their parents and from their parents’ religious faith to a greater degree, though they remain positively related to their parents (and economically dependent upon them) and hopeful about the future of this relationship. They are now preoccupied with life tasks and are struggling to retain optimism amid the baffling array of adult responsibilities before them. They see themselves as broke but are eagerly committed to a consumerist culture.

Above all, they are preoccupied with the concerns of the self. As a matter of fact, Smith, now William R. Kenan Professor of Sociology and Director of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at the University of Notre Dame, argues that this generation actually has difficulty imagining any objective reality beyond the self. As he explains, “Most have great difficulty grasping the idea that a reality that is objective to their own awareness or construction of it may exist that could have a significant bearing on their lives.” To all this he adds that these emerging adults are actually soft ontological antirealists, epistemological skeptics, and perspectivalists, “although few have any conscious idea what those terms mean.”

This is a breathtaking observation, yet even Smith seems to underplay what this means for this generation and for the future of American Christianity. These emerging adults are not hardened ideological postmodernists, but their belief systems reveal that a soft form of postmodern antirealism has become part of mainstream culture.

This observation goes far in explaining the religious and spiritual profiles of these young people. In the main, they do not see themselves as secular – much less do they see themselves as committed to a secularist ideology. Like Brad, the young man whose comments are cited in the opening paragraph of this essay, they just do not see themselves as related in any formal or binding sense with churches, formal beliefs, or religious institutions. As Amanda, a young woman highly involved in an evangelical congregation, explains, “Religion is not made for young people.”

They are postponing marriage and family formation — a pattern with vast consequences in light of the experience of previous generations-but they are definitely not postponing sex. They are playing around, hooking up, and cohabiting. They know that the Bible condemns these behaviors, and they promise themselves that they will one day settle down and adopt a more conservative sexual morality.

Like Augustine in his early years, they want chastity ... but not yet.

In a haunting and powerful paragraph, Smith explains how this tension between sexual behavior and moral expectation actually distances these young people from their religious and spiritual roots:

Therefore, emerging adults who are serious about their faith and practice have to do one of three things: choose to reject heavy partying and premarital sex; dramatically compartmentalize their lives so that their partying and sexual activities are firmly partitioned off from their religious activities in a way that borders on denial; or be willing to live with the cognitive dissonance of being committed to two things that are incompatible and mutually denying. Not many emerging adults can or will do any of these things, so most of them resolve the cognitive dissonance by simply distancing from religion.

Accordingly, these young adults are considerably less religious than their parents, less committed to formal doctrines, and less involved, not only in church life, but even in such activities as volunteering in charity work and social organizations.

As for Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, commitment to this belief system remains “alive and well.” The main difference between these young people at this stage of life, as compared to their adolescence, is that they now have a larger frame of reference and set of concepts with which to flesh it out.

At the same time, they do not register markedly higher levels of attachment to many liberal doctrines. They claim to believe in the divine inspiration of the Bible, in heaven and hell, and in any number of orthodox doctrines. Clearly, they are not theological liberals in any classic sense. At the same time, they are apparently living without any direct cognitive commitment to these orthodox beliefs.

On one measure of doctrinal orthodoxy, however, they are decidedly and overwhelmingly liberal. They have abandoned any belief in the exclusivity of the gospel. Religion is seen as a social phenomenon, claims of exclusivity are seen as intolerant, and heaven is seen as “one big party” where all basically good people go after death.

Writing over twenty years ago about evangelical young adults in that era, sociologist James Davison Hunter of the University of Virginia warned in *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* that the generation then in young adulthood — the parents of the generation profiled in *Souls in Transition* — was moving away from the belief that only those who believe in Christ will go to heaven. As he explained, “In the face of intense religious and cultural pluralism in the past century, the pressures to deny Christianity’s exclusive claims to truth have been fantastic.” Among today’s emerging adults, accommodation to that pressure is the rule rather than the exception.

Helpfully, Smith and co-author Patricia Snell point to several factors that encourage emerging adults to remain connected and committed to churches and beliefs — and these have mostly to do with the roles played by parents and other adults in their lives. Young adults who remain closely related to their parents, and who have parents who put a premium on maintaining that relationship, are far more likely to remain both connected and committed. Significantly, their continued commitment also has a great deal to do with the roles played by other adults in a congregation.

Put simply, this is a generation of emerging adults who are struggling to reach full adulthood in the culture of late modernity. They see themselves as needing older adults as allies, mentors, and friends. They know they need help, and they see themselves as facing greater challenges than those faced by their parents. They are not hostile to the faith of their parents, but they are swimming in a very different cultural sea. They are indeed souls in transition, and they seem to know that they are.

Christian Smith and Patricia Snell have offered the church and today’s generation of evangelical leaders, pastors, educators, and parents an invaluable portrait of today’s emerging adults in *Souls in Transition*. This generation is looking for help, guidance, and friendship. They reflect the culture into which they have emerged and the tensions of modern life. They are remaking the world even as they are being made by it.

They know that they are emerging into adulthood later than did their parents, and they know that they are engaging the world of adulthood in their own awkward way. As Smith and Snell assert, these emerging adults cannot be reached by “ramping up” religious programs. They are reached mainly, if not exclusively, by relationships with others, especially

older adults.

In other words, the real question for today's evangelicals is not what this emerging generation will mean, but what we are prepared to do. We can sit idly by and watch these young people emerge on their own, or we can step in as friends, guides, and fellow strugglers.

The stakes, as this important study makes clear, could not be higher.

Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults, by Christian Smith with Patricia Snell [Oxford University Press, 2009].

The article originally appeared in the Fall 2010 edition of *The City*, the outstanding intellectual journal published by Houston Baptist University. You can view the entire issue of this truly thought-provoking periodical [here](#).

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