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# Are Emerging Adults “Spiritual but Not Religious”?

BY PATRICIA SNELL HERZOG

The “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR) category has been an interesting group for congregations to study despite its not being a statistical majority. Sociologically, however, it is far more intriguing to concentrate on the entire range and consider the membership implications of each of the four types of emerging adults.

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**A**re American emerging adults—those young people who are between adolescence and adulthood—“spiritual but not religious” (SBNR)? The quick answer is yes and no. The longer answer is of course a bit more complicated. One of the great benefits of a sociological analysis is the categorization of complex phenomena. Emerging adult spirituality and religiosity is exactly that—a complex phenomenon. In fact, emerging adulthood itself is a complex phenomenon, fraught with multiple transitions and contradictions. Thus, I here complicate and simplify this question by offering instead the following typology of religious and spiritual combinations: RAAS (religious and also spiritual), RBNS (religious but not spiritual), SBNR (spiritual but not religious), and NRNS (not religious, not spiritual). The answer is that there are emerging adults in each of these four types, such that *some* emerging adults *are* SBNR and *others are not*.

SBNR emerging adults do not appear to compose the largest majority of emerging adults, nor do they appear to be particularly on the rise. However, they have gained a great deal of attention in popular and religious media for, I think, two primary reasons. One is that they offer a warning to those

in faith communities who think most emerging adults are religious (i.e. RAAS or RBNS), and two is that they offer some hope to those in faith communities who think most emerging adults are non-religious (i.e. NRNS). The SBNR category is thus a substantively interesting group despite not being a statistical majority. Sociologically, however, I find it far more intriguing to concentrate on the entire range and consider the membership implications of each of the four types of emerging adults.

### **RAAS: RELIGIOUS AND ALSO SPIRITUAL**

Beginning with the category that most people of faith are familiar with, religious-and-also-spiritual emerging adults are what Christian Smith and I in *Souls in Transition: The Religious Lives of Emerging Adults* term “committed traditionalists.” We write that these emerging adults

embrace a strong religious faith, whose beliefs they can reasonably well articulate and which they actively practice. Personal commitment to faith is a significant part of their identities and moral reasoning, and they are at least somewhat regularly involved in some religious group.<sup>1</sup>

Based on our qualitative interviews and their connection to our broader nationally-representative survey sample, we estimate that this group may constitute only about fifteen percent or less of emerging adults. To some people of faith, this statistic can be quite startling. By nature of the principle of reference groups, most people regularly involved in faith communities interact with others who are regularly involved in faith communities, resulting in a belief most people of faith are committed traditionalists. However, that is not the case.

In our collective experiences interviewing emerging adults for the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), we as interviewers are consistently struck by how few and far between these RAAS emerging adults are. In fact, in the fourth wave of NSYR data collection – which we are still in the process of systematically analyzing – our sense during our debrief meeting was that they are even more difficult to find now than they were in the previous wave (perhaps now constituting less than fifteen percent). Maybe their membership will rebound once they move into later adulthood and have children, as other studies have suggested. However, even then many of them would seem to be tending toward some of the other categories I will describe further below. While it is too early to predict that entirely, my own suspicion is that this group is small and generally in a slow state of decline. That is partly because this category has a high bar for participation, which most emerging adults no longer have.

To be a committed traditionalist, it appears there are six “recipes” of social characteristic combinations that are necessary for maintaining a strong religious and spiritual faith throughout the emerging adult years. We found that four of these recipes call for strong parental faith. Thus, to the extent

that previous generations have declined in their regular service attendance, subsequent generations will decline in their participation as well, unless they have the ingredients of the other two remaining recipes. Even then, one of the remaining recipes still requires social support through other adult members of a congregation. This effectively means that all but one of the recipes for RAAS emerging adults require a strong religiously-committed social fabric, which we already know is rare and potentially fraying. In summary, it does not appear that RAAS emerging adults compose an entirely solid ground for persistent membership. Even to the extent that they do, faith communities would do well to support parents and other members of congregations to actively sustain and cultivate the faith of these emerging adults.

### **RBNS: RELIGIOUS BUT NOT SPIRITUAL**

Another category that people of faith often encounter is emerging adults who are relatively religious but not entirely spiritual. These are the emerging adults that we in *Souls in Transition* labeled “selective adherents” and described as those who: “believe and perform certain aspects of their religious traditions but neglect and ignore others,” are “less serious and consistent about their faith,” and “compartmentalize their experiences” by “partitioning them into religious and various nonreligious segments.”<sup>2</sup> RBNS emerging adults have typically been raised in religiously-attending households and often have adopted many tenets of their faith tradition – mostly, it appears, from the habit of regularly participating throughout their childhood.

However, they do not seem to have the same level of personal spiritual connection to these practices. In many cases, it appears these emerging adults mostly continue to practice their faith due to their social commitments, not wanting to overtly “rock the boat” with their families by actively declining any aspects of their family religious heritage. Rather, they continue to practice certain elements, especially those which tend to conflict the least with other mainstream American values, and discard the rest.

Similar to RAAS emerging adults, the existence and persistence of RBNS emerging adults seems to rest primarily on the shoulders of the parents and other social connections that exert pressure to continue overt religious practices,

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at least sometimes. We estimate that roughly thirty percent of American emerging adults are already in this RBNS category. In addition, this group can act as a gateway for RAAS emerging adults to find their way to less committed forms as their involvement may waiver during their emerging adult transitions.

I personally find this group to be the one in need of most attention by faith communities, since the fact that they are still at least somewhat religiously active means that they are already from time to time within the walls of existing religious congregations. Most of what appears to sustain membership in these first two categories is their social connections to family or to people in faith communities. Thus, continuing their membership over time is especially contingent on not just getting them within religious walls but having something of substance offered once they are there to connect them to others within the congregation. This cannot simply be traditional forms of involvement designed in an era when people moved directly from adolescence to full adulthood. Marriage counseling, parenting classes, or any of the adult forms of programming that congregations typically offer do not appeal to most emerging adults, since many have not yet reached those stages. Furthermore, many do not find religious homes on college campus, and most emerging adults are past college for many years before settling down into later adulthood.

### **SBNR: SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS**

Spiritual but not religious are what we in *Souls in Transition* called “spiritually open.” We described these emerging adults as “not personally very committed to a religious faith” but “nonetheless receptive to and at least mildly interested in some spiritual or religious matters.”<sup>3</sup> While this group receives a good deal of attention, our estimate is that only approximately fifteen percent of emerging adults are SBNR. Some studies claim that this group is on the rise, and we did see some evidence of increase from 2008 to 2012. However, as of yet it does not appear to be a rapidly growing category or a statistical majority.

Perhaps because of their appeal as a way to increase membership, many claims exist about SBNRs that result in a number of mixed messages about this group. Part of the confusion is that SBNRs are themselves not a unified group. They have many important differences. Despite these distinctions, there are some aspects of emerging adults that are common across the different types of SBNRs. For instance, most SBNR emerging adults do believe in some form of a higher power. They also typically find it to be less important to commit to any specific theological tenets regarding the nature of that higher power or other implications of believing in it for life choices. Many of these emerging adults did attend religious services at one point in time, often at least periodically with their family during childhood. However, they have since either lost interest in religion or specifically become antithetical to the religious approaches to which they were exposed.

Some SBNRs are quite hostile to organized religion as a whole and think that it is more ideal for people to hold personal spiritual beliefs that are not religiously tied. This kind of SBNR can view religious attendance as a sign of weakness, saying that they do not need a faith community to sustain their religiosity. Other types of SBNRs are people who have no antipathy to organized religion, but they also hold no commitment to any particular form of religiosity. This type of SBNR emerging adult finds at least some truth in many different types of religions and prefers to not get "bogged down" in the details of different theologies. They instead compile a universal version of spirituality that is perceived to transcend various world religions. Of course, in many cases this "detraditioned" spirituality is still highly Christocentric, often adhering to the Golden Rule philosophy of most mainline Protestant churches.

While the two previous categories (RAAS and RBNS) are mostly important for considering how to maintain membership, the SBNR category perhaps has the most appeal in terms of thinking about potential conversions, as they can seem "ripe for the picking," so to speak. However, it is important for faith communities to recognize that not all SBNRs are created equally. Some are spiritual and friendly to religions of all kinds, while others are spiritual and unfriendly to organized religions of all kinds. Appealing to these very different types of SBNRs requires treating them distinctly. To emerging adults who have had negative experiences with organized religion, it appears from our process

of interviewing that they have strong desires to be heard and understood in their anti-religious stances. It could be that providing an understanding ear may help to ease the allergy to organized religion, but it is not entirely clear if that is enough. For many, they would likely need to be convinced that religious institutions are about more than simply increasing their numbers (or their dollars), as

many of these SBNRs think of religious organizations as simply Ponzi schemes.

Another hurdle in appealing to this group of emerging adults is that even if they do not have strong reactions against organized religion, they often do not see the value of it. Many of them have come, for various reasons, to believe that they do not *need* a social community to sustain their faith. They often describe themselves as being able to sustain their personal

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### **Most spiritual-but-not-religious (SBNR)**

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commitment without the aid of any outward forms of religiosity. While this type of SBNR does not have any problem with people participating in religious activities, they tend to “other-ise” religiosity and say that it is fine if “others” need religious communities, but they do not. Therefore, appealing to this brand of SBNR emerging adult would require somehow evidencing the ways in which a faith community can sustain a life of faith that personal spirituality cannot do alone. And again, as is the case for RBNS, they would likely need activities geared especially for emerging adults if they were to decide to participate.

A third type of SBNR that can be mixed together in mainstream conceptions with the previous two is those emerging adults who are quite friendly to religious tenets but see value in many or all existing world religions. These SBNRs are in many ways a “different animal” than those who are spiritual but antithetical to religion or those who are spiritual but indifferent to religion. They are instead pro-religion<sub>S</sub> with a capital S, meaning they believe in the existence of a higher power and think that nearly all religions are describing this same power. To this type of SBNR it is less important to know whether the higher power should be called God, or Allah, or the Universe, as it is simply to acknowledge that some sort of power exists and all human institutions of religion more or less describe this same energy. This type of SBNR shares a great deal in common with agnostics, but does not tend to have trouble saying that they know a higher power exists; rather they believe that religious organizations may not be able to fully understand the higher power and quibble over (mostly meaningless) misinterpretations of it. In this sense, these SBNRs can perceive faith communities as the blind men with the elephant, all having some true subjective experiences while also all being false in understanding the totality of the higher power. Attempting to grow membership by appealing to this type of SBNR would thus appear to require some sort of convincing argument as to how any one particular religion could better speak to the elephant as a whole, without simply sounding like one of the blind men believing it knows the elephant based off one part.

### **NRNS: NOT RELIGIOUS, NOT SPIRITUAL**

Last but not least, another increasingly-recognized category is emerging adults who are not religious or spiritual. This group is often referred to as “nones,” and many claim that NRNSs are on the rise. In *Souls in Transition*, we delineated three types of what I consider to be not religious or spiritual: “religiously indifferent,” “religiously disconnected,” and “irreligious.”<sup>4</sup> Combining these three groups, about forty percent of emerging adults could be classified as NRNS. Of these, the most interesting for increasing membership is probably the religiously disconnected emerging adults. This is because, like the two types of SBNRs described above, the religiously indifferent and irreligious are already fairly antithetical to



considering religion as either interesting or good. These emerging adults have usually had long histories of finding religion to be something that specifically brought negative experiences or that was simply boring. They would be very likely to encounter any person of faith as someone who is different than themselves and to have engrained scripts for separating themselves from anything considered religious. That is not to say it is impossible to increase membership in these types of emerging adults, only that it would seem to require deep, sustained involvement and some sort of life-altering experience.

The third type of NRNS is somewhat different, however. Emerging adults who are religiously disconnected struck us as having shockingly low exposure to people of faith in any context. Somehow they have managed to exist in a relatively non-religious reference group without parents or anyone meaningful in their lives having any interactions with religious organizations. Of the NRNS, they therefore seem to be potentially the easiest to appeal to, as there is not necessarily something negatively patterned against organized religion, merely an absence. Of course, that initial absence does not exist in a vacuum, and it may be hard for these NRNSs to overcome the nonexistence of religion in all other aspects of their lives. Yet we did get the sense that for at least a handful of this already small group (approximately five percent of emerging adults), their religiosity may look quite different if anyone in their lives ever simply invited them to a religious activity.

## **CONCLUSION**

In summary, are emerging adults SBNR? Yes and no. About fifteen percent are, but that group is distributed across three quite different types of SBNRs, with distinct implications for growth in membership rates. Religiously-disconnected NRNS also offer a potential for increasing membership. However, I think one of the main messages from the National Study of Youth and Religion research is the importance of

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focusing membership efforts first on the RAAS and RBNS. Religiously-attending emerging adults do not on the whole find that their faith communities have something to offer them during this unique life stage. While there are some notable exceptions, most emerging adults who do participate in religious communities find themselves to be in between the traditional

programming offered for youth and that offered for more established adults through marriage, childrearing, and other later adulthood statuses.

One of the more tragic elements of American religiosity, in my opinion, is the extent to which most religious congregations do not offer anything—services, programs, or activities of any kind—that appeal to and are specifically designed to target emerging adults. It is rare that religious congregations even acknowledge the life stage of emerging adulthood and how it differs from the needs of adolescence and adulthood, let alone offer something specifically for this life stage. The trouble then is that there are many emerging adults already in faith communities all over the country who still think they should keep coming, at least sometimes, and yet find very little designed for and connecting them when they do come. It should not be surprising then that over time some emerging adults may move from RAAS to RBNS, and some from RBNS to SBNR. Perhaps then faith communities should be less concerned about whether emerging adults are SBNR and instead whether emerging adults are SUBR: severely underserved by religion.

## NOTES

1 Smith, Christian with Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 166.

2 Ibid., 167.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., 168.

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