

# Faith and Spirituality among Emerging Adults

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The religious landscape of the United States is in a period of long-term, fundamental transformation, and all of the evidence suggests that today's emerging adults will provide a catalyst that accelerates this transformation. Since 1990, the percentage of Americans who claim no religious identity has more than doubled, from 7% to 15%. There is a focus on *spirituality*—as a way of talking about experiences of connection and transcendence, as a way to designate a wide-ranging set of practices used to connect with the sacred, and as an expression of a critical distance from organized religion. At least 20% of Americans identify as “spiritual and not religious,” and over 40% identify as both spiritual and religious. There has been a reaction against the recent politicization of religion; the “culture wars” have caused some Christians to turn away from their religious identity altogether, and surveys show a new preference for more distance between religious leaders and politics.

All of these trends are important—and all of them are concentrated among younger cohorts of Americans, especially those 35 and below. However, it is also important to understand that these trends build on and extend changes begun by the Boomer generation, especially the emergence of a new, individual-expressive style of religious commitment. Furthermore, the transformations brought about by Boomers and their children, today's emerging adults, are best understood as a set of variations on the core themes that have characterized American religion throughout the 19th and 20th centuries—especially its pragmatism, moralism, and voluntarism. The religiosity of today's emerging adults may well cause changes in American religious institutions, but there is continuity, as well as change, in their religious and spiritual lives.

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## **A New Focus on Emerging Adults**

Social scientists know a great deal about American religion—its history, how it is organized, and the character of its major institutions. We also understand religious commitment in the United States. In general, being married, having children, being female, having more education, and having had a mother who was herself religiously active all make it more likely that a given adult will attend church, pray regularly, or engage in other spiritual practices. In fact, these factors taken together, along with race and employment status, explain well over 40% of the variation in individual church attendance—a figure that is extremely high when it comes to predicting the chaotic and idiosyncratic behavior of individuals. We have known far less about the faith and spirituality of emerging adults, but important new research allows us to describe young adults' religious involvement and compare it to that of other adults today and to the religious involvement of earlier generations.

Especially important is the recent research, based on good national datasets, of two sociologists: Robert Wuthnow, who focuses on religion and spirituality among Americans who are younger than 45, and Christian Smith, who analyzes the religious and spiritual lives of Americans from 18 to 23 years of age. Largely because of their research, along with some other studies of young adulthood, we now know that emerging adults experience and practice religious faith and spirituality differently than do other adults today. Moreover, they are different than their parents were, and it is this historically distinct approach to faith and spirituality, and the possibility that it will lead to different lifelong trajectories of religious involvement, that raises the question of whether emerging adults will cause the next set of major changes in religious institutions in the United States.

## **Pragmatic, Moral, Therapeutic**

In general, religion in the United States is a matter of private choice. There is no state-mandated religion, and the overarching trend of the late twentieth century has been toward increasing tolerance of religious pluralism. Because religion in the United States is voluntary, pluralistic, and culturally rich, it has flourished, for much of American history, as a basis for expressing group-based social identities, especially for new

immigrants, but also for Americans of color. To borrow and update an idea from the midcentury social philosopher Will Herberg, to be Mexican Catholic, or Korean evangelical, or a member of the Black Church are simply different ways to be American. Moreover, religious involvement was widely understood for much of the 19th and 20th centuries to be an expression of civic engagement and national identity; the United States has been understood as culturally, if not officially, Christian.

Some religious groups have emphasized strong boundaries and doctrinal rigor, but by and large, the overall tenor of American religiosity has been a kind of pragmatic moralism, or what sociologist Nancy Ammerman calls “Golden Rule Christianity.” In a famous study of Muncie, Indiana (or “Middletown”), sociologist Theodore Caplow found a pragmatic “common creed” religiosity that emphasized the importance of treating others well, of believing in heaven and that good people go there when they die, of prayer and good works. Today’s emerging adults very much share this pragmatic, nondoctrinal, and moralistic approach to religion, with one additional dimension.

Emerging adults have what some would call a therapeutic orientation, a sense that religious involvement is a good thing to do if it makes you feel good about yourself or if it expresses an important part of your individual (not group-based) identity—spiritually speaking, if it feels good, do it. Sociologist Christian Smith calls the faith orientation of today’s emerging adults “moralistic therapeutic deism.” This approach to religious commitment is not something that today’s emerging adults invented. They learned it from their parents or from religious institutions that were shaped by their parents’ Baby Boom generation. Baby Boomers largely rejected an understanding of religious involvement as a moral obligation or part of one’s obligation to one’s community. Boomers are religious “seekers” who have adopted a range of spiritual practices and transformed religious institutions to fit with their lives.

### **The Importance of Family Formation**

Religion and family are intertwined and interdependent institutions. Since the 1970s, there have been two demographic trends that have reconfigured family formation in the United States. First, an increasing percentage of Americans never marry or, if married, never have children. Second, those who do marry and have children are delaying both of

those events, sometimes well into their 30s. For the first time in history, the majority of emerging adults (those 18 to 29 years old) are not themselves married with children and are not surrounded by others who have made that life transition.

My own research suggests that mainstream religious institutions in the United States are still using an approach to family ministry that was developed in the 1950s. This form of ministry provides programming for children and teens and for mothers (and sometimes, now, for fathers). Programs for singles are relatively rare and most are oriented toward singlehood as a short-term status and focused on helping the single person to find a suitable Christian spouse. As Robert Wuthnow points out, this means that emerging adults today face a 10- to 15-year period in which religious institutions, by and large, do not offer meaningful ministries oriented to facilitating their longer and messier transition into adult establishment. And there are few ministries relevant to those who may plan on a longer-term period of singleness or childlessness and view this as a normal part of adult life. Among younger Americans (those under 45), unmarried adults are less likely to attend church than are their married counterparts today—but they are *also* less likely to attend church than their counterparts (single young adults) did a generation ago. And there are many more unmarried adults today than a generation ago. Changing family formation patterns explain most of the increase in the percentage of young adults who are not religiously involved.

### **New Realities—Distance from Organized Religion**

Today's emerging adults are less involved in organized religion than are older adults:

- They are half as likely to attend church weekly or more (15% of 20-year-olds and 20% of 30-year-olds attend church weekly or more, compared to about 40% of older adults).
- Over 20% of emerging adults say they belong to no religious tradition, compared to 14% of all adults.
- 35% of emerging adults are not members of a church, synagogue, or mosque, compared to 19% of all adults.
- 23% of emerging adults (ages 18–29) say they are “secular” or “somewhat secular,” compared to 15% of those ages 35–64, and only 10% of those over 64.

Emerging adults today are also less involved than their parents were:

- In the early 1970s, 31% of those under age 45 attended church weekly or more; only 25% do today. 14% said they “never” attend church; 20% say that today.
- Comparisons using other measures—daily prayer, the saliency of religion—show similar patterns.

Overall, evangelical Protestants do a better job than mainline Protestants of retaining their young adults, but these churches are no longer growing and are, instead, holding their own in membership (as are Jewish and Catholic traditions).

It was once common for sociologists to argue that even if young adults “dropped out” of religion in their late teens or early 20s, they would “come back” once they were married and started having children. But it is not clear that “coming back” is the right way to think about the religious trajectories of emerging adults. Larger numbers of them were not religious in the first place or were raised by Boomer parents who taught them to think of religious involvement not as an obligation but as a choice. Research by Michael Hout and Claude Fischer, sociologists at Berkeley, suggests that this changing parental orientation partly explains why the percentage of Americans claiming no religious identity rose from 7% in 1980 to 15% in 2000. They estimate that changing parental norms regarding children’s religious involvement explain about half (roughly 4%) of this 8% increase. And for all emerging adults, it is unclear whether coming back to participation in organized religion is the automatic choice once one has lived for up to a decade without religious involvement.

The meaning of being religiously unaffiliated changes when the number of the unaffiliated increases. Once a gesture of rebellion for young adults, today’s young adults do not interpret having a secular outlook or being unaffiliated as shocking or as a “statement.” It is one of the taken-for-granted options. Overall, 20% of Americans identify as “spiritual, but not religious,” and about 40% identify as both spiritual and religious. Younger adults (those born after 1965) are more likely to self-identify as “spiritual, not religious,” and among emerging adults (those under 30), a language of spirituality is sometimes used as a way to signal a kind of “critical distance” from organized religion.

In a survey of 18- to 23-year-old Americans, sociologist Christian Smith identifies six religious types. Committed Traditionalists embrace a strong religious identity, know religious doctrine, and practice regularly (15%). Selective Adherents (30%) adopt some of the religious beliefs and practices of a particular religious tradition but reject others. The Spiritually Open (15%) are not religiously committed, but are open to the idea of religious faith and practice. The Religiously Indifferent and Religiously Disconnected either do not know much about religion or do not care about it either way (30% combined). And the Irreligious (10%) are secular in orientation and often critical of religion. Adding together the last three categories, a majority of emerging adults (55%) are neither committed to nor knowledgeable about mainstream religious institutions.

When they do choose to become involved in organized religion, emerging adults are understood, by some scholars, as the driving force behind the development of new forms of worship and religious organization. Some point to new kinds of congregations, for example, “emergent church” congregations that are consciously postmodern, eclectic, and organized in a nonhierarchical way. Others point to the fact that emerging adults are more comfortable with multiculturalism and value diversity; studies of congregations that resemble a racial/ethnic mosaic find that they are, largely, young congregations. Still others wonder whether the megachurch phenomenon is driven in part by emerging adults wanting to “plug in” to large and multipurpose communities with modern music and aesthetics. But it is too soon to know whether any of these trends constitute a movement toward a new kind of emerging adult spirituality or religious practice.

### **Why Faith and Spirituality Matter**

Scholars who study the faith and spirituality of emerging adults sometimes view the reduced religiosity of this generation as a cause for concern. In his book *Souls in Transition*, sociologist Christian Smith speaks to a “contemporary cultural crisis of knowledge and value” (p. 292) that has so shaped the lives of emerging adults that it has left the majority of them thinking of the truth as relative at best or, at worst, unknowable. While he points to a laudable trend of increasing tolerance for diversity, he worries that their culture has failed them, leaving them “lacking in conviction or direction” and in “larger visions of what is true and real and good, in both the private

and the public realms” (p. 294).

Others, however, reach different conclusions. Jeffrey Arnett, a developmental psychologist, has studied the spiritual and religious lives of young adults, and he also finds that some emerging adults are deists who are not all that concerned with doctrine and that some are not religious at all. Moreover, all the young adults he studied adopt an individualistic approach to faith and spirituality. But Arnett sees this as a normal developmental feature of young adult life, in which a period of exploration and self-focus is a necessary step on the way to adult autonomy. He cautions researchers to be careful about transferring the stereotypes that were once common regarding adolescents—that they are lazy, selfish, and angst-ridden—to emerging adults. He points to the overall high levels of optimism, well-being, and life-satisfaction among emerging adults as evidence that their tolerance and openness do not undermine a sense of identity or worth. He uses their high rates of volunteering as one example of how emerging adults exhibit a moral seriousness and a compassion for others that belie common stereotypes. From Arnett’s perspective, there is no generalized “crisis of values” among emerging adults. Rather, there is a long period of healthy exploration and the forging of new, generationally appropriate norms regarding relationships, consumption, and the like.

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow also rejects the “crisis of values” view. Among emerging adults, those who would in previous generations have been nominally religious have chosen to not affiliate or identify. But among those who identify, religious faith matters in shaping “private” behaviors like marriage or the decision to have a child and “public” behaviors like voting or forming views of social and political issues. Like Arnett, Wuthnow emphasizes the appropriateness of a long period of adult establishment, both religious and otherwise, given the economic realities that young adults face. He places the crisis within institutions, which have been slow to acknowledge and adapt to the changing realities young adults face.

There is debate about whether emerging adults are experiencing a crisis of values or are exploring and forming a generationally appropriate set of values that make sense given the economic and institutional arrangements that shape their lives. But there is no debate among social scientists about the generally positive effects that religious

involvement has on a range of life-outcomes: reduced crime, delinquency, and depression; increased well-being; increased happiness and satisfaction in one's life and with one's marriage and family relationships; marital stability; civic involvement; and general health. Christian Smith argues that young adults today, compared to earlier generations, show increased consumerism and materialism and a higher tolerance of alcohol use, drug use, and casual sexual encounters. He believes those trends are caused by reduced religious involvement.

Robert Wuthnow's work raises questions about whether the positive outcomes associated with religious involvement depend upon finding a religious community with appropriate ministries that fit the realities of young adults' lives. He suggests this is more difficult for today's emerging adults than for previous generations. And Jeffrey Arnett's work raises the question of whether religious involvement has protective effects only for those for whom it is legitimate and taken-for-granted. Finally, it should be noted that we know far less about the effects of spirituality on well-being than we do about the effects of standard measures of institutional religious involvement. We also do not know whether emerging adults, given their longer period of adult establishment, rely more heavily than their parents did on extended family relationships, peer relationships, and other sources of support (including paid services) that might affect their well-being. How religious involvement matters in the overall "package" of social support one receives is a question that has not received much scholarly attention.

From the point of view of religious leaders, the faith and spirituality of emerging adults matters for a much more practical reason. It is one thing if emerging adults are less involved in mainstream religious institutions because they are "stretching out" the period of adult establishment and plan to affiliate when they are older and have formed their own nuclear family households. It is quite another if the lower religious participation rates of today's emerging adults signal a long-term trajectory of reduced religious participation. Such a trend would effectively "shrink" mainstream religious institutions. This could be understood as religious *decline* if the reference point is the 1950s. More accurately, this should be understood as a return to more normal levels of religious involvement, because the religious expansion of the 1950s and its high rates of church attendance and affiliation were the exception, not the rule, in the history of



American religion.

While it is important for religious leaders to attend to the cultural changes ushered in by today's emerging adults, it is also important for religious leaders to recognize the continuities in faith and spirituality between today's emerging adults and earlier generations. Emerging adults are restless and voluntaristic and critical of traditional authority figures and institutions. When it comes to matters of faith, they are pragmatic therapeutic moralists, and in this, they are quintessentially American.

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## **Annotated Bibliography**

### ***Young Adults' Religion and Values***

Arnett, Jeffrey J., and Lene Arnett Jensen. (2002). A congregation of one: Individualized religious beliefs among emerging adults. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 17 (5): 451–467.

Examines the religious beliefs and practices of 140 emerging adults ages 21–28. The authors found great diversity in the importance their subjects ascribed to religion, in the content of religious belief, and in attendance patterns. Overall, subjects fell into four roughly even categories—agnostic/atheist, deist, liberal Christian, and conservative Christian—but there was also considerable diversity within each category. Participants' religious beliefs were highly individualized, and there was little relationship between childhood religious socialization and current religious attendance or beliefs. The authors found widespread skepticism toward religious institutions. The results reflect the individualism of American society as well as the focus in emerging adulthood on forming one's own beliefs.

Arnett, Jeffrey J. (2007). Suffering, selfish slackers? Myths and realities about emerging adults. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 36, 23–29.

In recent years, several myths have grown up around emerging adulthood. This essay addresses three of those myths: the claim that they suffer from a normative "crisis,"

the accusations that they are “selfish,” and their alleged reluctance to “grow up” and become adults. For each issue, evidence is presented showing that the myth exaggerates or falsifies the true experience of emerging adults.

Barry, Carolyn McNamara, and Larry J. Nelson. (2005). The role of religion in the transition to adulthood. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 34 (3): 245–255.

The authors draw on data from 445 undergraduates, ages 18–25, from Catholic, Mormon, and public colleges. They wanted to explore the role of religious culture in the emerging adult life of college students. The authors found that religious culture matters for emerging adults, shaping both the criteria that young adults deem necessary to be counted as an adult and the extent to which they felt they had achieved full adulthood. They also found substantial variation in spiritual beliefs and practices and in the link between religiosity and behavior. They emphasize cultural variability and exploration that shape the meaning and experience of emerging adulthood.

Smith, Christian, with Patricia Snell. (2009). *Souls in transition: The religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults*. New York: Oxford University Press.

This report on the National Study of Youth and Religion is a follow-up to the book *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. The book profiles spirituality and religious belief and participation in the transition from youth to early adulthood, concentrating on the ages of 18–24. It is highly accessible and based on good data. Containing both survey data and in-depth interviews, this book is a good window into the worldview of emerging adults themselves. The book identifies different “types” of emerging adults, based on religiosity, ranging from “committed traditionalists” to “the irreligious.” The weakness of this book is that this is conceived of as a continuum: those interested in spiritual exploration or who affirm some parts of their religious traditions but question others are understood not only as *differently* religious but as *less* religious than the committed traditionalists.

Uecker, Jeremy, Mark Regnerus, and Margaret Vaaler. (2007). *Losing my religion: The*

social sources of religious decline in early adulthood. *Social Forces*, 85 (4): 1667–1692.

The authors use data from the National Survey of Adolescent Health, a large longitudinal study, to assess the sources of declining religiosity in early adulthood, with a focus on long-standing assumptions about the secularizing effects of higher education, normative deviance, and life-course factors. They find that it is religious participation, not the importance of religion, that declines in early adulthood. The most extensive decline occurs among those not going to college, undermining conventional wisdom about the secularizing effects of higher education. They find that religious decline is curbed by marriage but increased by cohabitation, nonmarital sexual activity, and drug and alcohol use.

Wuthnow, Robert. (2007). *After the baby boomers: How twenty- and thirty-somethings are shaping the future of American religion*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

This book is mostly about the religious and spiritual lives of post-Boomer generations in the United States. It is highly accessible and based on good data. Its main concerns are how changes in religiosity and spirituality for Americans under 40 will pose challenges for mainstream religious institutions and how those challenges can be overcome. Wuthnow's thesis is that changes in religiosity are largely driven by changes in the life course, especially the long period of emerging adulthood that characterizes the lives of post-Boomers. The strength of the book is that it looks at long-term and large-scale demographic transitions that affect all emerging adults.

### ***Religious “Nones” and Other Trends***

Kosmin, Barry A., Egon Mayer, and Ariela Keysar. (2001). *The American Religious Identification Survey*. New York: CUNY Graduate Center report, [www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research\\_briefs/aris.pdf](http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_briefs/aris.pdf).

This survey is a repeat of a survey administered in 1990 and is an excellent source for recent trend data in Americans' patterns of religious affiliation and identity. The survey finds declines in religious participation, affiliation, and identification from

1990 to 2001 and a growing number of Americans who self-identify as secular. All of these trends are more prominent among emerging adults.

Marler, Penny Long, and C. Kirk Hadaway. (2002). "Being religious" or "being spiritual" in America: A zero-sum proposition? *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 41, 289–300.

The authors use a national sample of American Protestants and explore the relationship between "being religious" and "being spiritual." They compare their findings to other studies, including research by Wade Clark Roof on the Baby Boomer generation (described here) and Gallup poll data. They show that for a small percentage of Americans (about 20% at most), being religious and spiritual are distinct, but that for most Americans they overlap. Younger Americans (those 45 or younger) are more likely to describe themselves as spiritual and not religious.

Roof, Wade Clark. (1993). *A generation of seekers: The spiritual journeys of the baby boom generation*. New York: HarperCollins.

The author draws on survey data from over 2,000 surveys of Boomers in four states (California, Massachusetts, Ohio, and North Carolina). Roof profiles seven different respondents as showing "typical" patterns of spiritual seeking. The stories reflect the diverse range of experiences, from those engaging in New Age spirituality to born-again Christians to those who have left or adopted an eclectic range of religious and spiritual practices. In general, Roof found that Boomers value personal experience more highly than institutional sources as the basis for religious authority, distrust institutions, seek personal fulfillment over the expression of communal identity in their religious choices, change allegiances frequently, and are not oriented toward the preservation of religious doctrine.

### ***American Religious Institutions—History and Culture***

Ammerman, Nancy T. (1997). Golden Rule Christianity: Lived religion in the American mainstream. In David Hall (Ed.), *Lived religion in America* (pp. 196–216). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

The author draws on over 100 interviews from participants in the Congregations in Changing Communities Project and on a survey of over 1,500 respondents. The interviews were oriented toward exploring the role of religion in everyday life and the role of congregations in local communities. She finds three orientations: an evangelical orientation that focuses on a personal relationship with Christ, an activist orientation that focuses on changing social structures, and what she calls Golden Rule Christianity. This last is the dominant orientation (51%), and it was common among all denominations. Golden Rule Christians include people who say that the most important attributes of a Christian are caring for the needy and living one's Christian values every day. The most important task of the church, they say, is service to people in need.

Caplow, Theodore, Bruce Chadwick, Dwight Hoover, Howard Bahr, and Joseph Tamney. (1983). *All faithful people: Change and continuity in Middletown's religion*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Following a tradition of community studies, Caplow and his colleagues conducted a follow-up study of Muncie, Indiana ("Middletown"), to compare their findings with an earlier community profile of Muncie conducted in the 1920s. This volume has chapters that explore a range of topics, from the religious demographics of the community to Christmas and other holiday rituals. One chapter focuses on the "common creed" that the authors claim is widely shared among adherents of Middletown's mainstream faiths: a belief in heaven and that good people go there, a belief that prayer is important and that it works, a belief in a benevolent God, and an emphasis on the importance of faith as a source of everyday moral trustworthiness and good citizenship.

Edgell, Penny. (2005). *Religion and family in a changing society: The transformation of linked institutions*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

This volume is a study of mainstream religious institutions in four upstate New York communities, with additional data collection (a survey and in-depth interviews) among community residents. The author argues that most mainstream religious

institutions today engage in a pattern of family-oriented ministry that originated in the religious expansion of the 1950s but that is out of touch with the lives and concerns of many Americans today. She also finds that congregations that approach family ministry in a more innovative manner, though few in number (15% of congregations in the communities she studies) draw the most adherents (40% of the community's churchgoers attend innovative congregations).

Warner, R. Stephen. (1993). Toward a new paradigm for the sociological study of religion in the United States. *American Journal of Sociology*, 98, 1044–1093.

Warner argues that voluntarism and pluralism are characteristic of the religious institutional landscape in the United States, making religious communities vibrant vehicles for expressing group-based identity and fostering civic involvement. They have been especially important, Warner argues, for fostering immigrant assimilation to mainstream American society, echoing an argument made earlier by William Herberg in his important book *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (1960; reissued by University of Chicago Press in 1983). Warner argues against an older theoretical paradigm that viewed the privatization of religion as a secularizing force.