

YOUNG, EMERGING, LOST OR ARRESTED? A REVIEW OF RECENT RESEARCH ON YOUNG ADULTS AND RELIGION

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Young Adults in Crisis

Every generation of adults, it seems, worries about the next generation coming along behind them. For at least the last hundred years parents and researchers alike have focused intensively on the pivotal stage of adolescence — the time when teenagers travel from childhood through the threshold of adulthood. Sociologist Christian Smith argues, today the more significant research population and the more determinative age cohort for the future of American religion may well be “emerging adults” — or what appears to be a new life stage between adolescence and adulthood, variously named “emerging” adulthood, twenty-somethings,” “youthhood,” “adulescence,” and “extended adolescence.”¹ The slipperiness of its label bespeaks the ambiguous and problematic status of this stage of life, yet perhaps upon this very generation the future viability of mainline Christianity depends.

Life stages are neither natural nor immutable; rather, they are profoundly shaped by the social conditions that sustain them. Prior to the middle of the nineteenth century in the United States, young people moved directly from childhood to adulthood without a prolonged delay in adolescence. In a largely rural and agrarian America, a person’s physical strength largely constituted readiness for adult social roles. The decline of the family farm and the emergence of managerial and professional jobs changed the criteria for adulthood, hence the shape of adolescence. As formal secondary education became important for credentialing the new middle class, adolescence emerged as a new stage of life, as essentially a holding environment in which young people are to be educated, protected, socialized — and sometimes trivialized, domesticated and exploited.

If “adolescence” was largely a twentieth century invention, so “emerging adulthood” is a product of rapidly changing post-industrial conditions of the twenty-first century. Sociologists have traditionally identified the “transition to adulthood” according to five milestones: completing school, leaving home, becoming financially independent, marrying and having a child. In 1960, 77 percent of women and 65 percent of men had passed all five milestones by the time they reached 30; yet, in 2000, according to data from the United States Census

¹ Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6.

Bureau, fewer than half of the women and one-third of the men had done so.² We are in the thick of what one sociologist calls “the changing timetable for adulthood.”³ The shockwaves of this new timetable are having impact across every social institution — families, schools, politics, economics and churches. To some degree, the decline of the mainline Church mirrors the decline of religious affiliation among young adults; which arguably makes the future of the mainline church more or less dependent upon its effectiveness in reaching young people. Yet, for reasons theological and practical, the Church must not see young adults merely instrumentally as a commodity or, valued, as Carol Howard Merritt says, “for their demographic.” To foreshadow a conclusion, the Church’s ministry with young adults should be crafted with care and a deep understanding of the particularity of young adults’ experiences and the shifting social conditions that determine their lives. This article surveys recent research on the status of young adulthood, especially the religious commitments of young adults, and will hazard some general conclusions for the Church’s ministry with young adults.

The Social Construction of Emerging Adulthood

Considering the life stage of young adulthood as problematic is not entirely new. Over forty years ago, in 1970, an article in *The American Scholar* declared “a new stage of life” for the period between adolescence and young adulthood. Yale psychologist Kenneth Keniston wrote, young people of the day “can’t seem to ‘settle down.’”⁴ He called the new life stage “youth.” Keniston wrote of “a growing minority of post-adolescents [who] have not settled the questions whose answers once defined adulthood: questions of relationship to the existing society, questions of vocation, questions of social role and lifestyle.” Youth had a distinct psychological profile which Keniston characterized as “pervasive ambivalence toward self and society,” “the feeling of absolute freedom, of living in a world of pure possibilities” and “the enormous value placed upon change, transformation and movement.”⁵ In the late 1960s, Keniston’s post-adolescent “youth” constituted only a small minority, yet foreshadowed what would become a majority by 2000, and which would be theorized by Jeffrey Arnett as “emerging adults.”⁶ More than any single figure Arnett has sought to normalize “emerging adulthood” as a prolonged moratorium in which young people experiment and eventually confirm their life identity and direction. According to Arnett, changes at the turn of the twenty-first century have laid the groundwork for a new stage between the age of 18 and the late 20s.

² Statistics are from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series extracts (IPUMS) of the 1960 and 2000 U.S. Censuses, as reported in Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., Sheela Kennedy, Vonnie C. McCloyd, Rubén G. Rumbaut, Richard A. Settersten, Jr. “Between Adolescence and Adulthood: Expectations about the Timing of Adulthood” in *Research Network Working Paper No. 1: Network on Transitions to Adulthood and Public Policy*, July 29, 2003 Internet, <http://transitions.s410.sureserver.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/between.pdf>.

³ Robin Marantz Henig, “What Is It About 20-Somethings?” *New York Times Magazine*, August 22, 2010, Magazine.

⁴ Kenneth Keniston, “Youth: A ‘New’ Stage of Life,” *American Scholar*, 39 (1970), 632-36.

⁵ Keniston, *American Scholar*, 634.

⁶ Jeffrey Arnett, “Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties,” *American Psychologist*, (2000; 2004).

As a result, adulthood occurs later than in previous decades. Instead of entering marriage and parenthood in their early twenties, most young people now postpone these transitions until their late twenties or early thirties, and spend their late teens through their late-twenties in self-focused exploration, trying out different possibilities for love and work – experimenting with various identities, lifestyles and career paths.⁷ Historically, such identity exploration was understood as the task of adolescence, but according to Arnett, it takes on new urgency in the twenties. The stakes are higher when people are approaching the age when options tend to close off and lifelong commitments must be made. Arnett calls it “the age 30 deadline.”⁸ Christian Smith identifies six key causes for the new stage of “emerging adulthood:”⁹

1. The number of young adults pursuing higher education has grown dramatically;
2. Increasing numbers of American youth over the last decades delay marriage¹⁰ and embrace various alternative living arrangements. The median age at first marriage in the early 1970s was 21 for women and 23 for men; by 2009 it had climbed to 26 for women and 28 for men — an increase of five years in a little more than a generation.¹¹ Today, two-thirds of all young adults live for a time with a romantic partner without being married.
3. The American and global economy undermines stable, lifelong careers and replaces them with lower security careers, more frequent job changes, and an ongoing need for new training and education.¹² Today, young people go through an average of seven jobs in their twenties.¹³
4. Today’s parents’ are more willing to extend financial and other support to their children, well into their twenties and perhaps early thirties.¹⁴ Currently, “among

⁷ It is worth noting that much of what Arnett considers as the appropriate work of emerging adults Erik Erikson once assumed as the normal task of adolescence.

⁸ Robin Marantz Henig “What Is It About 20-Somethings?” *New York Times Magazine*, August 22, 2010.

⁹ These six causes are documented in Christian Smith’s book, *Souls in Transition*, 4-6.

¹⁰ Between 1950 and 2006, the median age of first marriage for women rose from 20.3 to 25.9; for men during the same time the media age rose from 22.8 to 27.5. Half a century ago, many young people were anxious to get out of high school, marry, settle down, have children, and start a long-term career. But many youth today face almost a decade between high school graduation and marriage to spend exploring life’s many options as singles, in unprecedented freedom.

¹¹ Christian Smith, Kari Christoffersen, Hilary Davidson, Patricia Snel Herzog, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) 13.

¹² Most young people today know they need to approach their careers with a variety of skills, maximal flexibility, and readiness to retool as needed. That itself pushes youth toward extending schooling, delay of marriage, and, arguably, a general psychological orientation of maximizing options and postponing commitments.

¹³ Henig “What Is It About 20-Somethings?” *New York Times Magazine*, August 22, 2010.

¹⁴ According to best estimates, American parents spend on their children an average of \$38,340 per child in total material assistance (cash, housing, educational expenses, food, etc.) over the 17 year period between ages 19 and 34. These resources help to subsidize the freedom that emerging adults enjoy of taking a good, long time before settling down into full adulthood, culturally defined as the end of schooling, a stable career job, financial independence, and new family formation.

adults ages 25 to 34, 61% say they have friends or family members who have moved back in with their parents over the past few years....”¹⁵

5. Readily available birth-control technologies have severed the link between sex and procreation, consequently fostering uncommitted sexual relationships.
6. Postmodernism, a philosophy that has promoted subjectivism (there is no objective truth) and moral relativism (what’s moral depends on your point of view), now thoroughly permeates the educational ethos, mass media, and youth and adult culture. If birth control severs the tie between sex and procreation, then the loss of traditional moral standards effectively severs the ties between sex and marriage.

As a result of these six converging influences, Smith says, the transition to adulthood today is significantly more protracted, complex, self-absorbed, anxiety-burdened, and dangerous.¹⁶

The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood

However, unlike Arnett, some are not so ready to baptize this new stage of “emerging adulthood” as normative — a merely innocent, if prolonged, moratorium. Sociologists James Côté and Anton Allahar deliberately employ the term “arrested adulthood” to describe this pre-adult cohort.¹⁷ Côté and Allahar agree with Arnett that young adults in the modern era face a different set of challenges from previous generations; but they insist that adulthood is delayed for structural reasons rooted in the fact that the labor of adolescents is no longer needed, except in service industries. As new technologies incessantly reduce the work force and alter the social fabric, an entire generation of young people struggles financially and politically to keep up. More higher education graduates are produced than the economy demands, so that many (in Côté and Allahar’s analysis, close to half) end up underemployed after graduation with jobs that require lower levels of skill than their education has provided them. Diminished participation in the labor force leaves young people nearly powerless as citizens and with few

¹⁵ Kim Parker, “The Boomerang Generation: Feeling OK about Living with Mom and Dad,” *Pew Research Center*, Internet, available from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2012/03/PewSocialTrends-2012-BoomerangGeneration.pdf>.

¹⁶ Smith, *Lost in Transition*, 6.

¹⁷ Additionally, according to Côté and Allahar, today's adults are themselves more like adolescents, in their dress and personal tastes, than ever before; many seem to drift and avoid responsibilities such as work and family. Many in the industrial West are simply not "growing up" in the traditional sense. Instead, they pursue personal, individual fulfillment and emerge from a vague and prolonged youth into a vague and insecure adulthood. The transition to adulthood is becoming more hazardous, and the destination is becoming more difficult to reach, if it is reached at all. Côté claims that many adults allow the profit-driven industries of mass culture to provide the structure that is missing, as their lives become more individualistic and atomized. Others resist anomie by building their world around their sense of personal connectedness to others. See James Côté and Anton Allahar *Arrested Adulthood: The Changing Nature of Maturity and Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

choices other than to remain in school under the watchful eye of massive educational bureaucracies.¹⁸ Côté and Allahar insist that creeping credentialism¹⁹ mostly benefits educational bureaucracies, and has little bearing on job skills except as a necessary, but insufficient, credential for middle class employment.

While Arnett's assumption that young adulthood is prolonged because of extended education demanded by advanced technology, Côté and Allahar reveal, to the contrary, that in this new technologically rich work environment, 66% of the jobs in the market require less than 12 months on-the-job-training.²⁰ Côté and Allahar conclude that adolescence and young adulthood constitute one of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in society. The median weekly earnings of full-time working young males aged 16 to 24 (the most prosperous teen demographic) has fallen by over 30% in the past 40 years;²¹ earning them only 70% of what older males make. According to the Pew Center for Research, 5.9 million Americans ages 25 to 34 live with their parents – an increase of 25% from 2007; while poverty rates for households headed by someone under 25 have doubled from 16% to 30% in the same time period. Young adult employment is at its lowest point since World War II; among those 16 to 29 it has declined 18% between 2000 and 2010. Thirty-seven percent is the poverty rate among young families with heads of household younger than 30. Additionally, poverty seems to correlate with young adults' readiness for marriage; a record low 44 percent of those aged 25 to 34 are married — down from 57 percent in 2000.²² Significantly, for the first time, teenagers and young adults in the United States, Canada, Japan, Scandinavia and Western Europe can expect to have a lower standard of living than their parents.

In essence, youth are conditioned to stay young longer, and, as a result, have become further socially and economically marginalized. Moreover, Côté and Allahar argue that leisure and identity “marketeers” exploit this “coming of age” culture in which young people seek markers of identity, not by personal empowerment or civic participation, but by purchasing illusory and fleeting commodities that bestow provisional adult status.²³ The authors contend that marginal status and social disenfranchisement makes the adolescent and young adult ego vulnerable, tenuous, and easily manipulated by institutions of the entertainment industry, sports and fashion markets, the military, and educational bureaucracies, all of whom benefit financially from emerging adult cohorts.²⁴ Such disenfranchisement of young people seems also to have emotional consequences. Contemporary young adults are approximately 10 times more likely than their parents to be depressed.²⁵ If adolescence involves a tenuous bargain (preparation

¹⁸ James Cote and Anton Allahar, *Generation on Hold: Coming of Age in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1996) xvi.

¹⁹ Credentialism denotes the situation in which educational credentials become the necessary, but insufficient requirement for middle class employment.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

²² Derek Thompson, “Are Today’s Youth Really a Lost Generation?” *The Atlantic*, September 22, 2011.

²³ Côté and Allahar, *Generation on Hold*, xvii.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

²⁵ William Damon, *The Path to Purpose: How Young People Find Their Calling in Life* (New York: Free Press, 2009) 62.

now; freedom later), then “emerging” adulthood extends this bargain, confining them in institutions in which they have less than full power for longer than any age cohort in history.

How might this prolonged marginalization of young adulthood affect their religious participation? To answer such questions, sociologist Christian Smith and his colleagues interviewed over 3,000 American adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17.²⁶ Smith’s landmark study found that most American adolescents claimed to be religious. However, Smith characterizes their religion as “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” They have faith in a moralistic deity who expects human creatures to behave, to feel good about themselves, and to run their own lives without too much divine intervention. Smith followed these teenagers into young adulthood interviewing 230 of the same individuals studied as adolescents, who are now not 13 to 17 year olds, but 18 to 23 years old. In *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*²⁷ and its companion volume, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*,²⁸ Smith and his associates ask, “What is it like to be an 18- to 29-year-old in America? How are they faring on their journey to full adulthood? And, what is the role of religion?” What does Moralistic Therapeutic Deism look like when confronted by the freedoms and challenges of young adulthood?

Smith exposes a dark side of emerging adulthood; according to his study, young adults are disproportionately subject to substance abuse, consumerism, sexual promiscuity, lack of moral language, withdrawal from civic and political engagement and a host of emotional maladies. He posits that 60 percent of the 230 young adults interviewed are identified as “moral individualists” who believe that every individual must be free to act on his or her personal values. They practice a form of banal tolerance – not judging others, being tolerant, and not imposing one’s own values. Fully half of these Smith calls “strong moral relativists” who believe that “morality is whatever people think it is” and that “there are no definite rights and wrongs for everybody” (“Terrorists are doing what they think is the ultimate good,” said one interviewee).²⁹ Smith finds the young adults unable to “distinguish between objectively real moral truths [e.g., ‘slavery is a moral evil’] and people’s human perceptions of those moral truths.”³⁰ Most emerging adults, Smith says, “...think that people’s believing something to be morally true is what makes it morally true” and that “if some cultures believe different things about morality, then there is not a moral truth.”³¹

²⁶ Their massive study of adolescent religion in America was published in as *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²⁷ Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²⁸ Christian Smith, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 28.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

³¹ A positive note: Nearly three-quarters of Smith’s sample say they themselves, as individuals, intuitively and automatically know what is right and wrong in any given situation, and they normally try to follow their conscience. They typically explain their “instinctive knowledge” of what’s right with reasoning that sounds like the traditional natural law notion that there is a moral sense embedded in our human nature.

Hence, according to Smith, most emerging adults are ill-equipped, because they lack moral language, to resist themselves morally harmful behavior (cheating, drug use, uncommitted sex). Also, because morality is seen as a matter of personal opinion, they are ill-equipped to engage in thoughtful moral reflection about moral issues that demand our attention in a world that has become “much more complicated, pluralistic, and morally challenging.”³² Smith reveals that most emerging adults have a close and problematic relationship with consumerism. He states that “between one-half to two-thirds of emerging adults said that their well-being can be measured by what they own, that buying more things would make them happier, and that they get a lot of pleasure simply from shopping and buying things. A majority of emerging adults today thus appear quite positively disposed to materialism and consumerism...”³³ In a chapter “Intoxication’s Fake Feeling of Happiness” Smith reveals that getting drunk “is a central part of emerging adult culture.”³⁴ Further, the authors write “All is not well among the emerging adults who inherited the sexual revolution launched by their parents and grandparents in the 60s and 70s. A lot, though not all, of emerging adults today are confused, hurting, and sometimes ashamed because of their sexual experiences played out in a culture that told them simply to go for it and feel good.”³⁵ One young woman describes the prevailing sexual culture in this way: “I think obviously sex is no longer sacred, and people are just giving it away . . . Men get what they want with women, which generally speaking is physical fulfillment, and women think they’re gonna get what they want, which is commitment. And people just go from one person to the next.”³⁶ Finally, in the chapter titled “Civic and Political Disengagement” Smith concludes that “almost all emerging adults today are apathetic, uninformed, distrustful, disempowered, or, at most, only marginally interested when it comes to politics and public life.”³⁷ In Smith’s view, most emerging adults lack the necessary moral reasoning to function effectively as thinking citizens. Those interviewed were characterized by “nearly total submersion of self into private networks of technologically managed intimates and associates.” Only one-quarter spoke of wanting to help others or being a positive influence in others’ lives. Smith comments:

Could it be that the triumph of liberal, democratic capitalism has erased from the common American imagination any higher, transcendent horizon? We came away from our 230 interviews with emerging adults thinking that, for most, their horizon is disappointingly parochial: Get a good job, become financially secure, have a nice family, buy what you want, enjoy a few of the finer things in life, avoid the troubles of the world, retire with ease. Nothing much bigger, higher, more meaningful, more transcendent, more shared, more difficult.³⁸

³² Smith, *Lost in Transition*, 68.

³³ *Ibid.*, 71.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 110.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 192.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 180.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 225.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 236.

Tim Clydesdale’s research, considered more fully below, echoes this theme, revealing that young people protect themselves from critical or transcendent perspectives that threaten their acceptance in the middle class. Smith, like Côté and Allahaar, is finally not sanguine concerning the positive legacy of “emerging adulthood.”

Purposelessness Among Young Adults

William Damon, a leading scholar of human development and Director at Stanford University’s Center on Adolescence, points to a sense of purpose that provides direction for one’s life — including one’s career, relationships, civic responsibilities, and ethical duties — as determinative of health, and he finds this sense of purpose lacking among adolescents and emerging adults. Damon’s book, *Path to Purpose*, draws from the findings of the *Youth Purpose Project*, a landmark four-year nationwide study of how young people from the ages of 12 – 26 are struggling to find their purpose in life. He explores the psychology of disengaged and drifting young people, and exposes the depth of their confusion and anxiety about what they should do with their lives. Damon tells us why most of our efforts to entice or goad our children on to success have fallen short.

Damon concludes that instead of helping young people achieve enduring, life-fulfilling goals, the American emphasis on superficial, short-term success diminishes their natural optimism and creates young people who lack confidence and direction as they define their futures. According to Damon Americans have become expert at finding short-term solutions to get through their lives — and they are instilling the same sort of shortsighted thinking in their kids. While short-term goals (e.g., homework, grades, making the team) may be necessary for adapting to a present situation and while young people can learn from them, such goals do not entertain the important questions like “What kind of person do I wish to become?”; “What do I want to accomplish with my life?”; or “Why should I strive?” These questions might create forward momentum and lead to lasting satisfaction. According to Damon, only one in five American young people in the 12 to 22 age range express a clear vision of where they want to go and what they want to accomplish and why. Almost a quarter express no aspirations at all and, in some cases, see no point in acquiring any.³⁹ Despite whatever positive benefits accrue⁴⁰ from “emerging adulthood” such a “failure to launch” demonstrates a lack of a sense of purpose. Simply put, young adults generally feel little obligation to participate in causes larger than themselves and their immediate social networks. Damon notes:

Their delay is characterized more by indecision than by motivation or reflection, more by confusion than by the pursuit of clear goals, more by ambivalence than by

³⁹ William Damon, *The Path to Purpose: How Young People Find Their Calling in Life* (New York: Free Press, 2009) 8.

⁴⁰ For example Arnett observes that emerging adults are cultivating healthier relationships with their parents. See Jeffrey Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) 47 ff.

determination. Directionless drift is not a constructive moratorium in either a developmental or societal sense. Without a sense of direction, opportunities are lost, and doubt and self-absorption can set in...excessive delay beyond the period of readiness creates the serious risk that the young person may give up altogether on the tasks of finding a positive direction, and acquiring the skills needed to achieve the directional goals.⁴¹

In Damon's view, a prolonged moratorium that does not help young people to discern their purposes and commitments risks arresting them in a permanent state of directionless drift. A sense of purpose can enhance the well-being of young people, and a loss of purpose causes a host of emotional and psychological problems. Without a sense of purpose, many young people become psychologically fragile, self-absorbed, depressed or lethargic.⁴² Damon observes that the search for a sense of purpose is now assumed to be a strictly individual pursuit. In truth, according to Damon, the paradox is that purpose is both "deeply individual and unavoidably a social phenomenon, best guided by families and communities."⁴³

Parents and communities that support young people play key roles in helping them to find their purpose. Yet, parents and teachers seldom talk to kids about the things that they find meaningful in their own lives and careers or about how setbacks and activities that seemed discouraging at the time actually led to something satisfying in their lives. He argues that the advice we give youth increasingly makes them cynical: they hear dire warnings that things are unachievable and will not net enough attention or profit, along with crafty advice about beating the competition. According to Damon, young people need to hear how they can derive personal satisfaction from doing something that makes a difference in the world — even if they don't get public recognition and huge financial rewards. Yet, he insists that a parent cannot accomplish the task of identifying a purpose for a child, just as a parent cannot choose the child's personality or write a script for the child's life. But a parent can introduce options and help a child sort through choices.

Despite this disturbing trend of purposelessness, Damon observes a "minority-within-a-minority"⁴⁴ of young people who accept and seek out major commitments and stick with them over time. Some are altruistic and work to address human needs, such as raising money for breast cancer treatment, providing clean drinking water for families in Africa, or feeding homeless people in their community. Others engage civic or political causes, such as lobbying for stronger gun control, the end of the death penalty, environmental regulation or peace in the Mideast. Still other young people pursue scientific quests, write computer software or create music.

⁴¹ Damon, *The Path to Purpose*, 5.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 77.

Why do some young people find a sense of purpose while others do not? Damon, along with colleague Peter Benson of the *Search Institute*, observe that nearly all young people, when asked, are immediately able to identify “sparks” of purpose within themselves that can be fanned into flame and give direction to their lives. Benson, in his book *Sparks: How Parents Can Help Ignite the Hidden Strengths of Teenagers* characterizes sparks of purpose as those experiences which:

- give us energy and joy,
- make us feel alive and useful, drawing on our best potential,
- cause us to lose a sense of time as we are fully absorbed in the moment,
- originate from inside of us, not outside,
- may emerge as a skill, talent or interest,
- might be thought of as our gift or reason for being in the world,
- are not just episodic activities or amusements, but prime sources of meaning, self-directed action and purpose, and
- make the world a better place for others.⁴⁵

This research is important for many reasons. If nothing else, this research importantly shifts the focus from a view that emphasizes adolescent problems to one that highlights the assets of youth and young adults. But it also points to the sources or “sparks” of purpose that, when rightly attended, can give direction to the identities and purposes of young people.

Identity Lockboxes and American Moral Culture

Tim Clydesdale observes structures in American culture that inhibit the purposefulness that Damon seeks, at least during a young person’s first year out of high school. In his book, *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens after High School*,⁴⁶ Clydesdale provides an insightful look at the protective impulses of young people during their last year in high school and first year of college. Analyzing 125 in-depth interviews with 75 different teenagers, notes from a year of field research at a public high school in New Jersey, and additional data from 36 college teen volunteers, Clydesdale refutes the long-held assumption that the first year out of high school is a time of self-reflection and identity-formation. Clydesdale observes that “rather than seeing schooling as an opportunity to examine oneself and one’s place in the larger world, most American teens keep core identities in an “identity lockbox” during their first year out. They actively resist efforts to examine their self-understandings through classes or to engage their humanity through institutional efforts such as public lectures, the arts, or social activism.” He notes, “That lockbox preserves teens’ mainstream American identity from intellectual or moral tampering that would put them out-of-step with the communities that shaped them or

⁴⁵ Peter Benson, *Sparks: How Parents Can Ignite the Hidden Strengths of Teenagers* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008) 19.

⁴⁶ Tim Clydesdale, *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens after High School* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007).

hinder their efforts to pursue the individual achievement they have always envisioned for themselves.”⁴⁷ He argues that

...the current default settings in the United States install a popular American moral culture that: celebrates personal effort and individual achievement; demonstrates patriotism; believes in God and a spiritual afterlife; values loyalty to family, friends, and coworkers; expects personal moral freedom; distrusts large organizations and bureaucracies; and conveys the message that happiness and fulfillment are found primarily in personal relationships and individual consumption.⁴⁸

Most teens preserve core identity constructions (including religious, political, civic, racial, and gender identities) by keeping them in separate compartments within a secure lockbox, so that they can focus on the more pressing management of daily life during the first year out.

Clydesdale’s observes that the religious/spiritual beliefs and practices of young adults depends largely on those previously passed on by their families, and are likely to remain as part of their locked identity until later in life. Clydesdale argues that preserving religious identities is crucial since, if they were to shift, they could put teens critically out of step with mainstream culture and jeopardize their future. The new American economic realities underscore the importance of not tampering with either culturally mainstream identities or their trajectories, so that teens maintain the best odds of attaining the private happiness they have been socialized to seek. As Barbara Ehrenreich argues “the fear of falling”⁴⁹ is deeply rooted in mainstream American identities. Core identities and general outlooks remain largely unchanged despite the best intentions of educational courses and curricula. Teens stay within their established trajectories because culturally mainstream teens are products of, participants in, and proponents of a popular American moral culture that envelops their families and other mainstream institutions in which they are reared. Religious faith serves to reinforce popular American moral culture and offers assurances that being nice and doing things that culturally mainstream Americans do will pay off. This view of teen and young adult religiosity is consistent with Christian Smith’s characterization of teen religion as “moralistic, therapeutic Deism.”

In reality, the first year out of high school is, for most young people, a period of learning daily life management skills. Chief among these is the need to manage personal relationships and adult gratifications such as alcohol and sex in light of the demands of the workforce and the college classroom. Since most parents expect teens to take on greater financial responsibility in their first year out of high school and since this expectation combines with a rising lifestyle, these forces make earning and spending major components of teen life in their first years out. The engine of consumption is now a source of major stress as young people scramble to locate and work in low-wage jobs during college. Ironically, according to Clydesdale, such work does not, for the most part, contribute to young peoples’ work ethics or their professional

⁴⁷ Ibid., 4.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁹ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1989).

experiences, but rather becomes an obstacle to other potential goals such as volunteering and building social networks. Moreover, student work does not translate into financial acumen, as those who saved and were most frugal, in the end, were those who worked the least. Clydesdale's research notes that students would prefer to have courses that are challenging but that deliver information they can use in their everyday lives.

According to Clydesdale, the looming dark cloud is this:

“Most American teens do not question whether or not popular American moral culture provides a sufficient basis upon which to construct individual biographies or sustain shared lives.... most teens possess only good management—and have inadvertently pitched their tents in a flood basin.”⁵⁰

Clydesdale concludes

It is ironic that in the same year that American teens gain competence in managing their day-to-day activities, they become equally accomplished in ignoring the longer-term direction of their lives and neglecting their interdependence with community, civic life, national politics and global issues.... Few and far between are teens whose lives are shaped by purpose, who demonstrate direction, who recognize their interdependence with communities small and large, or who think about what it means to live in the biggest house (contra Parks) in the global village.⁵¹

In this wistful reflection we hear echoes of Damon's warning about the decline of purpose among young people. While teens learn to play the game of life management fairly well — as they negotiate intimate and peer relationships, adjust to new family roles, learn to satisfy authority figures, manage their gratifications, forge strategies for their material needs and wants — the widespread use of the “lockbox” diminishes teens' willingness to connect their lives to deeper values or purposes thoughtfully.

Developmental Vision

Sharon Parks published *The Critical Years* (1986)⁵² based on her doctoral work, but significantly for our purposes it was rewritten as *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (2000). While the earlier book explored the meaning-making capacities of young adults, her revision places a stronger emphasis on the context in which young adult development can flourish; she emphasizes the significance of

⁵⁰ Clydesdale, *The First Year Out*, 5.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵² Sharon Parks, *The Critical years: The Young Adult Search for a Faith to Live By* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).

mentoring environments to support young adult development. In her view, young adulthood is the time ripe for the formation of a worthy “Dream” of a more just and flourishing world.

According to Parks, “critical shifts have taken place (in North American culture) that call forth deepening understanding of the anxieties and aspirations of young adults” as they construct their lives. Among these critical shifts, she mentions the economy, the extension of the life span, the technology/communications explosion, and the rise of religious pluralism. Parks observes that the tasks of young adulthood are a microcosm of the transition we must now make as a culture.⁵³ Not only are young adults living on the cusp of adulthood, but also we are living in a turning point in the flow of history, shaped by new technologies, global markets, and increased awareness of planetary interdependence. This is a time of unprecedented change that is prompting reconsideration of nearly every feature of life. It is crucial that we generate new ways of imagining this interdependent world and our role in it, since the quality of our consciousness shapes our response.⁵⁴ Our actions no longer impact only our local communities, but now ripple through the world’s economic, environmental, political, cultural and social fabric. This new world situation brings with it an enormous need to prepare people to become citizen-leaders, able to engage the great questions of our time and to respond purposefully to the challenges we face utilizing critical, systemic, and compassionate habits of mind.⁵⁵

According to Parks, young adulthood is a time of rethinking conventional meaning and engaging a critical-systemic perspective required to understand our place in the world. In her view, the way for young adults to appropriately form faith is to question it as well as examine and grow in appreciation for other faith expressions in order to then reformulate a new, critically examined faith. Parks fears that young adults will not be able to move to the third step of reformulation upon completion of the questioning and examination stages, since young adults today “are not being encouraged to ask the big questions that awaken critical thought in the first place.”⁵⁶ Thus, she concludes that “swept up in religious assumptions that remain unexamined and economic assumptions that function religiously, they easily become vulnerable to the conventional cynicism of our time or the economic and political agendas of a consumption-driven yet ambivalent age.”⁵⁷ Parks agrees with Damon that young adults require critical intervention in order to discover a sense of purpose that is attentive to the healing of the world. Such dreaming requires a mentoring environment that provides the right mix of support, challenge, opportunity, and inspiration. Finding purpose is not only a psychological necessity, but also holds social urgency. Our world needs for young people to find their place. In the face of such a potentially calamitous cultural reality, Parks vigorously argues that “mentoring communities” play a pivotal role in the faith formation of young adults. To Parks,

⁵³ Sharon D. Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000) 127.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, xii.

the features of a mentoring environment include:

A Network of Belonging⁵⁸ — A trustworthy holding environment where young adults can try and fail or succeed while experiencing support and challenge.

Big Enough Questions⁵⁹ — An attitude of inquiry where questions of meaning, purpose, and faith are welcome and pursued with vigor.

Encounters with Otherness⁶⁰ — Experiences with those strangers “outside one’s own tribe.”

Habits of Mind⁶¹ — Habits that invite dialogue, strengthen critical thought, encourage connective-holistic awareness, and develop the contemplative mind.

Worthy Dreams⁶² — Imagined possibilities that integrate meaning, purpose, and aspirations within the young adult.

Access to Images⁶³ — Images and examples of truth, transformation, positive selves/others, and interrelatedness.

Communities of Practice⁶⁴ — Humanizing practices that include hearth, table, and commons.

Parks concludes the book with a vision for how mentoring communities might function in various spheres of life such as higher education, professional education, the workplace, travel, the natural environment, families, and religious faith communities.

Decline in Religious Affiliation

Recent research, such as Flory and Miller’s *GenX Religion*,⁶⁵ Cherry, DeBerg, and Porterfield’s *Religion on Campus: What Religion Really Means to Today’s Undergraduates*,⁶⁶ Clark’s *From*

⁵⁸ Ibid.,135.

⁵⁹ Ibid.,137.

⁶⁰ Ibid.,139.

⁶¹ Ibid.,142.

⁶² Ibid.,146.

⁶³ Ibid.,148.

⁶⁴ Ibid.,154.

⁶⁵ Richard Flory and Donald Miller, *Gen X Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁶⁶ Conrad Cherry, Betty DeBerg, Amanda Porterfield, *Religion on Campus* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural,⁶⁷ Lytch's *Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens*,⁶⁸ and Smith's *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, reveals a widespread religiosity among American teens.⁶⁹ Yet, such religiosity among teens stands in contrast to the religious habits of emerging adults.

According to a recent Pew Research study,

By some key measures, Americans ages 18 to 29 are considerably less religious than older Americans. Fewer young adults belong to any particular faith than older people do today. They also are less likely to be affiliated than their parents' and grandparents' generations were when they were young. Fully one-in-four members of the Millennial generation are unaffiliated with any particular faith. Millennials are also more unaffiliated than members of Gen Xers were at a comparable point in their life cycle (20% in the late 1990s) and twice as unaffiliated as Baby Boomers were as young adults (13% in the late 1970s). Young adults also attend religious services less often than older Americans today. And compared with their elders today, fewer young people say that religion is very important in their lives.⁷⁰

The number of Americans who do not identify with any religion is growing at an unprecedented pace. In 2007, 60 percent of those who said they seldom or never attend religious services nevertheless described themselves as belonging to a particular religious tradition. Yet in 2012, only 50% could say the same — an unparalleled 10-point drop in five years. More specifically, one-fifth of the U.S. public and a third of adults under 30 (32%) are religiously unaffiliated today, the highest percentages ever in Pew Research Center polling.⁷¹ This is compared with just one-in-ten unaffiliated (9%) who are 65 and older. Such disaffiliation also does not seem to correlate simply with any developmental phase, since, as suggested in the above statistics, young adults today are significantly more likely to be unaffiliated than were previous generations at a similar stage in their lives.⁷² The ranks of the unaffiliated – concentrated

⁶⁷ Lynn Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (New York: Oxford University Press).

⁶⁸ Carol Lytch, *Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens* (Westminster John Knox, 2003).

⁶⁹ According to Christian Smith, around 60% say religious faith is important in their lives.

⁷⁰ *Pew Research Center Report, "Millennials: A Portrait of Generation Next"* (February, 2010) 85.

⁷¹ *"Nones" on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation*, Pew Research Center, October 9, 2012, Internet, can be found at http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/Unaffiliated/NonesOnTheRise-full.pdf. This report includes survey data from several sources, including newly released results from a survey conducted June 28-July 9, 2012, by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press and the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, among a national sample of 2,973 adults. The new survey is based on telephone interviews among adults 18 years of age or older living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia (1,771 respondents were interviewed on a landline telephone, and 1,202 were interviewed on a cell phone, including 596 who had no landline telephone).

⁷² Theories abound concerning this trend, but overwhelmingly, young adults think that religious organizations are too concerned with money and power, too focused on rules and too involved in politics.

among white, evangelical and mainline Protestants – are swelling, partly because Americans who rarely attend services are more willing than past generations to drop their religious attachments altogether.⁷³

Theories explaining this decline run the gamut from a backlash against the entanglement of religion and politics to a global relationship between economic development and secularization. Robert Wuthnow attributes an overall decline in church attendance by growing numbers of young adults since the 1970s to broader social and demographic trends, including the postponement of marriage and parenthood — times when individuals have traditionally drawn close to the Church.¹⁶ Pew Research Center polls confirm that married people under 30 are more likely to have a religious affiliation than are unmarried people at the same age. Yet, an analysis of religious affiliation by generation suggests that Americans do *not*, contrary to lore, become more affiliated as they move from young adulthood through adulthood, into marriage, parenting, middle age and retirement.¹⁷ Rather, the percentage of people in each generation who are religiously affiliated has remained stable, or decreased slightly, as that generation has aged. Some link the rise of the unaffiliated to a tendency among Americans to live more separate lives, engaging in fewer communal activities, a tendency famously characterized by Robert Putnam as “bowling alone.”¹⁸

In *Souls in Transition* Smith profiles several representative young people following six religious types:

- *Committed Traditionalists*⁷⁴ (15% of the total emerging adult population) grounded in mainstream faith tradition, although quite privatized, focus on inner piety and personal moral integrity;
- *Selected Adherents*⁷⁵ (30%) who often have strong religious upbringing tend to be more discriminating about what they will adopt;
- *Spiritually Open*⁷⁶ (15%) are not personally committed to one faith or another but are receptive to and mildly interested in some spiritual matters;
- *Religiously Indifferent*⁷⁷ (25%) are not particularly interested in religion, and it is not a priority or a commitment in their lives;
- *Religiously Disconnected*⁷⁸ (5%) have had little to no exposure to religious people, ideas, or organizations;
- *Irreligious*⁷⁹ (10%) tend to hold critical, derogatory, and antagonistic attitudes towards religion.

⁷³ The Catholic share of the population has been roughly steady over this period, in part because of immigration from Latin America.

⁷⁴ Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 166-167.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 167.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 167.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 168.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 168.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 168.

Smith observes that the young people in his study do not appear to be "dramatically less religious than former generations of emerging adults." In the main, they do not see themselves as secular – much less do they see themselves as committed to a secularist ideology. Most just do not see themselves as related in any formal or binding sense with churches, formal beliefs, or religious institutions. Smith argues that because the transition to adulthood is prolonged, this generation of young adults has experienced “a historically unparalleled freedom to roam, experiment, learn, move on, and try again.”⁸⁰ Such freedom conditions the lives of young people differently from preceding generations, in regards to religious and moral concerns. Young adulthood has traditionally been a stage in life without direct parental guidance or child-rearing responsibilities in which religious ties are loosened. But since the period between leaving home and marrying and setting up a home of their own is growing longer, the time without steady religious observance is prolonged as never before.

Yet, while young adults are postponing marriage and family formation, they are definitely not postponing sex. According to Smith, they know that the Bible condemns sex outside of marriage, and they promise themselves that they will one day settle down and adopt a more conservative sexual morality. 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 drinking and premarital sex; dramatically compartmentalize their lives so that their drinking 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 institutional religion, while maintaining spiritual longings.

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. According to Smith, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism continues to be the faith of many emerging adults, although it does exhibit greater variety and originality.⁸¹ 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. Not surprisingly, they claim to believe in the divine inspiration of the Bible, in heaven and hell, and in any number of orthodox doctrines; nevertheless 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. Above all,

⁸⁰ Ibid., 6.

⁸¹ Ibid., 155ff.

they are preoccupied with the concerns of the self.⁸² Smith 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.”⁸³ 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.

By contrast, the minority of deeply religious young people in Smith’s study have been made to think seriously and speak publicly about big questions from a young age. Their answers to the study’s questions are crisper and surer than those of their nonreligious counterparts. They *do* believe in a reality “out there” that can be studied and apprehended. Not only, according to Smith, does religion concentrate the mind and help young people to think about moral questions, but it also leads to positive social outcomes. Religious young people are more likely to give to charity, do volunteer work and become involved with social institutions (even nonreligious ones). They are less likely to smoke, drink and use drugs. They have a higher age of first sexual encounter and are less likely to feel depressed or to be overweight. They are less concerned with material possessions and more likely to go to college.⁸⁴

Although young adults have to some degree distanced themselves from their parents, and to a greater degree from their parents’ religious faith, 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. Helpfully, Smith and co-author Patricia Snell point to a factor that encourages emerging adults to remain connected and committed to churches and beliefs. Specifically, young adults who remain closely related to their parents, are far more likely to remain religiously connected and committed.⁸⁵ As Smith and Snell assert, emerging adults cannot be reached by “ramping up” religious programs. They are reached mainly by relationships with especially older adults. This is perhaps one of the more encouraging findings of this research because it means that the “religious commitments, practices and investments made during childhood” by religious institutions, parents, and families do matter.⁸⁶ In other words, emerging adults are products of the relational forces and environments at work in their lives; parents, families, and religious congregations are not irrelevant. The religious outcomes in emerging adulthood are not accidental; but they are a result of the formative religious experiences of childhood and adolescence.

When it comes to religion, parents’ religious practices are extremely important. According to this research, “one of the most powerful factors was the religious lives of their parents — how often they attended religious services, how important religious faith was in their own lives, and

⁸² Ibid., 45.

⁸³ Ibid., 45.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 270.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 297.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 256.

so on."⁸⁷ Parents praying, reading Scripture, and worshipping with their kids are important teenage-era factors that powerfully shape the religious outcomes of emerging adults. However, if parents are religiously withdrawn and functionally absent in childhood and adolescence, then the faith of an emerging adult likely will also be vacuous, directionless, and empty. The research also demonstrates that the strength of an emerging adult's religion is associated with positive life outcomes; high religious commitment can causally reduce alcohol consumption and sexual encounters. Researchers claim these associations are "real, quite consistent, and significant."⁸⁸

Young Adult Catholics

If there is a significant decline among mainline and evangelical Protestants, how do Catholic young adults fare? Dean Hoge and William Dinges on behalf of The Catholic University of America researched the religious characteristics of young American lay Catholics between the ages of 20 and 39. Their study targeted Catholics who have been confirmed in their faith by a ceremony in their parish church. They attempted to assess how, during ensuing years, these young adult Catholics evaluate their religious education, their overall Catholic identity, their spiritual needs, how Catholic institutions meet those needs, and how they themselves construct their Catholic and spiritual identity. Hoge and Dinges held 800 telephone conversations with young Catholics and followed up with in-depth interviews of at least an hour and a half with 80. Then they made 12 focus groups to help the researchers test and validate their understanding of the attitudes and feelings of the interviews. In a lengthy and meticulous report, they interpreted their findings through the lens of five problematic issues facing the Church. They also derive some recommendations from their own interpretations and those proposals articulated by young adults in this study. The themes that broadly characterize their findings include: Catholic Vitality, Institutional Affiliation, Identity Coherence, Waning Centrality, Religious Individualism, and Commitment Mechanisms.

According to this study, Catholic young adults identify strongly with Catholicism. In general, they find that young adults "like being Catholic" and cannot imagine themselves being anything else. Further, they view the sacraments and devotion to Mary as essential to faith. Most consider themselves spiritual, pray regularly and support the Church's social mission. Young people who identify strongly with Catholicism speak of a range of issues which make them proud of the Catholic Church: Catholicism is a global church; the Pope embodies moral integrity; the church has an ancient heritage and continuity in the apostolic tradition; and Catholicism holds such a diversity of dissenting perspectives.⁸⁹ These signs point to a kind of religious vitality among Catholic young adults. Alongside these are some negatives signs.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 285.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 276.

⁸⁹ Dean R. Hoge, William Dinges, Mary Johnson, Juan Gonzales, *Young Adult Catholics: Religion in the Culture of Choice* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2001) 219.

Young adult Catholics have a somewhat weaker and tentative affiliation to the institutional church than previous generations. Young adults feel that the Catholic Church constrains their religious search by frowning upon new experimental beliefs and practices — such as the role of women, issues of marriage, divorce, sexuality and the desire for more democratic structures.⁹⁰ Catholicism is significantly different from the Protestant experience in that despite young adults’ weaker institutional connection, they cannot imagine leaving the Catholic Church; they continue to affiliate whereas Protestants disaffiliate.

Researchers, however, identify disturbing indicators that may portend a shift away from ecclesial affiliation among Catholics. According to this study, young adults continue to hold certain foundational issues — such as the divinity of Christ, Resurrection, Incarnation, Trinity — as core; however, at the same time, they let go of certain other traditional beliefs core to Catholicism — such as the unique role of the institutional church in salvation, the primacy of the papacy, the role of the Church’s teaching authority, and the importance of sacramentalism.⁹¹ Significant numbers of young adult Catholics no longer see the Roman Catholic Church as unique or essential, the pope as necessary, the Church’s structures as important, or tradition as a source of objective truth. Contemporary young adult Catholics seem to choose their spiritual path and embrace the Church to the extent that it fits their self-definition, without benefit of normative Church authority. Hence, many young adult Catholics have a difficult time articulating a coherent sense of Catholic identity.

While many young adults like being Catholic, they are not sure what is distinctive about Catholicism. They are not well versed in Catholicism’s core narratives, its holy days, devotions, ritual rules or its moral teachings. According to the authors, “Their knowledge of the language and symbolism of the tradition is more limited and sparse —as is their experience of Catholicism as a tight-knit cultural system.”⁹² In this sense, they are virtually indistinguishable from mainline Protestants.⁹³ Young adults give only selective assent to the Church’s teachings and are disinclined to adhere to institutional standards for being a “good Catholic.” The authors state, for example, “While ...they rank social justice high in what they regard as essential to their faith, the relationship between social justice and a specifically Catholic identity remains unclear.”⁹⁴ Specifically, “...being religious simply means being a “good person, doing good deeds.” The authors attribute this disconnect to “...the multiple sources of spirituality today, the weakening of traditional Catholic devotionalism, the diminishing of the saints as models of spiritual virtuosi, and the emergence of evangelical Catholicism that minimizes the mediational role of the Church are further expressions of a weakening centrality of Catholic identity.”⁹⁵ Today, personal choice and religious individualism are dominant; gone are the days of general compliance with hierarchical and institutional norms, and the formative power of Catholic culture. Catholicism, like mainline Protestantism, has, since the 1960s, transformed

⁹⁰ Ibid., 220.

⁹¹ Ibid., 221.

⁹² Ibid., 222.

⁹³ Ibid., 223.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 224.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 224.

from a perceived church of obligation and obedience to a church of choice. Many young adults simply construct “being Catholic” on their own terms. Catholicism, for them, is less a binding community of discipleship and more like a cultural tool kit of symbolic religious/spiritual wares from which it is possible to construct a personal identity. Such individualism is especially problematic for Catholic ecclesiology and its role in salvation.

Finally, the authors observe significant slippage in the ways young Catholics are committed to their religious tradition. Citing Christian Smith’s observation that evangelical young people hold a form of faith that is “highly salient to their lives, and they have a robust church participation and a strong commitment to mission”⁹⁶ the researchers applied these criteria to young Catholics, and did not find the results encouraging. Catholic young adults are weak on most of the factors that make evangelicals strong. Unlike their evangelical counterparts, the current generation of young adult Catholics is less theologically orthodox than their elders; make only limited investments of time and energy in parish life; lack a sense of solidarity with other Catholics that would reinforce a strong Catholic identity; and, they spend little or no time proselytizing or sharing faith with others. The authors speak candidly about what their findings portend for the future of the Church. If many young adults now believe that there is nothing unique or distinctive about Catholicism or that all that counts is a generic Christian lifestyle, then “Catholicism’s institutional vitality, public witness, and capacity to retain its young are in jeopardy.”⁹⁷

Historically, Catholic identity was stronger in the past because of prejudice, discrimination, and the perception of Catholics as outsiders in American society. These conditions contributed to Catholicism’s internal solidarity. Today, Catholics find themselves in the ironic situation of having their identity threatened more by tolerance than intolerance. Those doctrines and practices that might put them out of step in American public life now lack credibility among young adults. The authors fear that weak centrality of Catholic identity will have effects on moral choices about marriage partners, child rearing practices, Catholic schooling, church attendance, and other life decisions. According to the authors, “Catholicism’s institutional vitality, public witness, and capacity to retain its young are in jeopardy.”⁹⁸

In light of their study of young adult Catholics, the authors propose the following recommendations, presented here as a suggestive list:⁹⁹

1. A “Preferential Option” for young adult Catholics,
2. Promote a distinct Catholic identity,
3. Build Catholic identity in a positive way,
4. Attention to the quality of the liturgical context,
5. Build better community,
6. Better young adult religious education,

⁹⁶ Ibid., 227.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 228.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 228.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 231-239.

7. Better marriage preparation,
8. More recruitment to the priesthood, religious life, and lay ministry,
9. Spirituality, prayer, and meditation,
10. Youth adult Catholic initiatives.

Although these recommendations only unfold in the last four pages of the book, it seems clear that the authors are not calling for any substantive changes in the Catholic tradition — its polity or programs. But they believe that the Church will be successful in retaining the young if only they intensify their efforts at reaching out to young people. As the final sentence reads, “In light of the dictum that the demise of a religious tradition is not about the death of the old, but the failure to retain the young, we believe this is the agenda for the twenty-first century.”¹⁰⁰

Summary of Themes

The research reviewed in this article does not exhaust the work in this vein, but it does represent important keys for understanding the social location of young people and their religious habits. Below, are some of the key themes summarizing the above research.

- **Problematic social location.** Unlike other epigenetic life stages, emerging adulthood does not seem to contribute uniquely to the life cycle, but seems to prolong many of the tensions and tasks of adolescence, while preventing their resolution in adulthood. The social location of contemporary young adults is determined by material and cultural forces that essentially forestall adulthood, including a sense of responsibility for self and the civic good. These include the global outsourcing of labor and the emergence of advanced technologies that eliminate jobs once held by young, burgeoning service sector employment with only low paying jobs for youth, educational credentialism, reduced earnings of young people, political disenfranchisement, prolonged life expectancy among older adults, birth control and the delay of marriage. Jeffrey Arnett rightly sees the need for a longer time and richer space in which young people may gain a sense of direction for their adult lives — a prolonged moratorium in which young people experiment and solidify their sense of identity and purpose; a prolonged period of limbo, which, according to William Damon, risks paralyzing young adults in a state of moral irresponsibility.
- **Shadow features of emerging adulthood.** Despite Jeffrey Arnett’s attempt to normalize emerging adulthood as a life stage, it tends to institutionalize many qualities that do not promote human flourishing, such as purposelessness, excessive drinking, sexual promiscuity, loss of moral language, civic and political apathy, as well as depression and emotional fragility. Identifying the dark side of emerging adulthood does not necessarily imply personal culpability as much as it does social

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 239.

responsibility. Even further, such ‘failure to launch’ can be viewed as a failure of families and communities to provide religious and communal resources and relationships for discerning life direction. These harmful characteristics of emerging adulthood does not bode well for the psychological, emotional and material well-being of young people, but, as suggested by Sharon Parks, holds negative consequences for our society and world.

- **Fear of falling.** Due to their vulnerable standing, young adults seem somewhat less open to critical perspectives that may put them out of step with the communities that shaped them or hinder their efforts to pursue the individual achievements they have envisioned for themselves. Specifically, according to Tim Clydesdale, young people may fear critical perspectives that do not emphasize personal achievement, patriotism, belief in God and afterlife, loyalty to family, friends, and coworkers, personal moral freedom, distrust of large organizations, and the fulfillment found primarily in personal relationships and individual consumption.¹⁰¹ As noted by Tim Clydesdale, such fear resembles the “fear of falling” from the middle class described by Barbara Ehrenreich.¹⁰² Threats to such American moral culture are found in some university courses, but also may be represented in certain kinds of American religion, particularly mainline Christianity. Especially at a time in which young adults feel vulnerable they may be averse to anything perceived as a threat. There is very little cultural support for larger visions of human endeavor beyond the horizon of consumer materialism. Such fear may play a role in American mainline Christian churches’ embrace of what Christian Smith identifies as Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, a domesticated form of faith that does not threaten the American moral culture.
- **Distance from institutional religion.** Despite a relative constancy in the spiritual yearnings for mystery and meaning as manifested in cultural expressions, young people are disaffiliating from established religion at a record pace. This disaffiliation is related, to some degree, to the prolongation of marriage and childbearing among young adults, but it also may be related to the problematic public persona of established religion. This trend seems to apply widely across traditions, but it applies more dramatically among mainline Protestants and less dramatically among Catholics and evangelicals. Such disaffiliation does not seem to indicate lack of spiritual interest or curiosity, but simply points to loss of institutional credibility; and in some cases, loss of the more complex narratives and practices that have sustained institutions since their inception.
- **Consistent early formation.** Several studies make clear that navigating the tasks of young or emerging adulthood effectively requires the resources of adults, communities and religious traditions. Such resources amount to consistency in

¹⁰¹ Clydesdale, *The First Year Out*, 3.

¹⁰² Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (New York: Pantheon, 1989).

promoting religious practices and worldviews, and effective support and modeling by parents and communities. When these are present in childhood, adolescence and into young adulthood young people more confidently accept the challenges and responsibilities of adulthood.

- **Role of mentoring.** One clear finding of several studies reviewed in this article involved the indispensable role that older adults can play in the lives of young adults. Sharon Parks suggested that young adults need older adults to help them embrace big questions and worthy dreams. William Damon insists that parents and other adult mentors can play a role in helping to notice, name and nurture the “sparks” of young people, and Tim Clydesdale found that parents and mentors play an important formative role helping young people to establish their world view, and to help faithfully navigate America’s moral culture.

The structural realities that prolong young adulthood are real, and so are the shadows they cast on the moral and emotional lives of young adults. While churches should inform themselves concerning the structural realities of young adults that prolong their full status as adults, changing these structures demands political response and the arc of the moral universe is indeed long. Yet, in the meanwhile, churches, families and communities who understand these themes might think strategically about the formation of young people within their purview. They might consider how they nurture young peoples’ interests and commitments, provide a deep sense of the religious narratives and practices, provide opportunities for appropriate leadership roles and responsibilities, and cultivate intergenerational community and age level cohort groups. Additionally, one very important issue that demands critical and creative response concerns the tension young people feel in their caughtness between the American moral culture and religious approaches that challenge the insipid Moral Therapeutic Deism. If, as by faith we know, the Christian gospel is qualitatively superior to consumer versions of faith, to which the mainline Church is tempted to assimilate, then we must find more effective ways of portraying the gospel in all its beauty.¹⁰³ Moreover, we must find ways of opening discussions about our own “fears of falling” — of our economic and social insecurity — and invite young people to talk of fears that inhibit their faithful Christian vocation. In other words, we need ministry approaches that take seriously the particularity of young adults — their wounds and gifts — and the particularity of the gospel in its layered beauty — as narrative, doxology, practice, witness, and vision. Not surprisingly, these two emphases — attention to the particularity of young adults and particularity of the gospel — can be seen in emerging ministry practices and literature. Over the last two decades, ministry approaches targeting young adults have proliferated, and we will not attempt to characterize them all in this article. Yet, a brief glimpse at two different approaches provides a sense of how these two particularities are being embodied in concrete ministry.

¹⁰³ Indeed, they are vulnerable on their own terms; they cannot deliver on the promise of happiness.

Implications for Ministry with Emerging Adults

A recent leading advocate on behalf of young adults is Carol Howard Merritt. Her books *Tribal Faith*¹⁰⁴ and *Reframing Hope*¹⁰⁵ attempt to interpret the yearnings of young adults to the institutional church that is too often mired in a rigid traditionalism that fails to perceive the wounds and gifts of young adults for leadership in the Church. Merritt argues that while many churches are seeking ways to reach out to the younger generations, this often collides with an unwillingness to change in order to make space for the unique gifts and perspectives of young people. “We only want you for your demographics” is the Church’s tacit message to the young. Outlining the financial, social, and familial situations that affect many young adults today,

Merritt describes how churches can provide a safe, supportive place for young adults to nurture relationships and foster spiritual growth. She argues for real intergenerational connections to be made, for such is vital for any church that seeks to reflect the fullness of the body of Christ. She helpfully describes the structural challenges facing contemporary young adults: the struggles of two-income parenting, student loan debt, parental care, stereotypes about laziness, the changing nature of work due to technology and contract labor, and the difficulty of forming friendships. Merritt casts a vision of the church embracing the gifts of all members, while reaching out to those young adults who might otherwise feel unwelcome or unneeded. Mainline churches have much to offer young adults, as well as much to learn from them. Merritt focuses on six primary ways in which the mainline church can work toward meeting the needs of the “missing generation:” by fostering intergenerational relationships, economic understanding, unambiguous inclusion, affirming traditions, sharing leadership and giving spiritual guidance.

In *Reframing Hope* Merritt’s argues that the modern world is ending, postmodernism is taking hold, and the Church needs to adapt in order to survive. She documents different ways in which Christian movements are reimagining faith for not just a new generation, but also for a whole new way of “doing church.” Merritt urges us to recognize and welcome the movement of the Holy Spirit manifested in younger generations — specifically, in a rise in spirituality and community-building, which she contrasts to modern ideas of power, structure and hierarchy. Merritt also focuses on the various technologies ushered in or embraced by young adults and how they are changing the Church’s practices. She perceives a shift in authority from books and pastors in the pulpit to a new locus in the Internet and random conversations.¹⁰⁶ The Internet and social media allows people who are interested in, for example, theology, models of shared governance or sermon ideas to converse with experts in the field, and share with other practitioners. She argues that today’s new communities are marked by their permeable boundaries and sharing across traditions. Traditions are not rejected and replaced as they were

¹⁰⁴ Carol Howard Merritt, *Tribal Church: Ministering to the Missing Generation* (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2007).

¹⁰⁵ Carol Howard Merritt, *Reframing Hope: Vital Ministry in a New Generation* (Herndon: Alban Institute, 2010).

¹⁰⁶ Merritt, *Reframing Hope*, 9ff.

in the evangelical movement (with its move from hymns and organs to rock bands and light shows) but instead are combined and formed into a new creation. In reaching new generations, Merritt advocates the power of story,¹⁰⁷ new forms of activism,¹⁰⁸ and practical ideas for confronting and healing our separation from the land.¹⁰⁹ She lists different areas of spiritual practice that need our attention to reintegrate body and spirit, daily life and our faith. She concludes that the evangelical concentration on individual faith and the liberal concentration on social justice are two streams that are starting to flow together – integrating our faith and correcting the errors of our past.

Merritt’s practical wisdom constitutes an important contribution to the Church’s ministry with young adults, specifically by making clear the particularity of young adults — their wounds and gifts – in a rapidly changing world. Adapting to young people is an appropriate form of the Church’s mission of hospitality. Merritt’s approach seems to be informed by hermeneutical theologies, theologies of liberation, and missiologies, all of which emphasize the fluidity of theological reflection growing from particular populations and contexts, hence her emphasis on the Church adapting to the particularity of young adults.

Another increasingly influential theological perspective can be found in the new orthodoxies — in narrative communitarians, such as Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre; in post liberals such as George Lindbeck; and especially in the radical orthodoxy of John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and David Bentley Hart. These figures have in common their relative disinterest in context and their insistence upon the particularity of the gospel, which exists as a culture to which all others must conform. In this view, the appeal of the gospel is its inherent beauty, not this or that social agenda, whether on behalf of the poor, women or young adults. The question is not how the church adapts itself to youthful habits and perspectives, but how fully the church manifests in its worship and practices, the beauty of the gospel. Arguably in this vein, Dorothy Bass and Susan Briehl, in their work with the Valparaiso Project, for example, have crafted a book, *On Our Way: Christian Practices for Living a Whole Life*, which elaborates Christian practices for young adults. Their argument is that the work of ministry is inviting young adults into a beautiful life ordered by paschal rhythms and doxological response. If Carol Howard Merritt envisions ministry as adapting to young adults and their contexts, Bass and Briehl envision ministry as inviting young adults to adapt their lives to the gospel. *On Our Way* elaborates practices of Study, Discerning God’s Call, Living as Community, Friendship and Intimacy, Singing Our Lives to God, Care for Creation, Making a Good Living, Honoring the Body, Knowing and Loving our Neighbors of Other Faiths, Peacemaking and Nonviolence, Doing Justice, and Living in the Presence of God. Each practice is elaborated scripturally and theologically and set in the context of the history of that practice for Christian communities across time. Of course, in real ministry, rarely do ideal types exist. In fact, we can glimpse the practices approach in Merritt’s work, and we can see that Bass and Briehl focus practices

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 72ff.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 81ff.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 93ff.

relevant for young adults. Both are part of the Church's dialectical work; neither can be neglected.

Looking Forward

Research on young adults over the last decade has provided the Church with new insight into the social construction of young adulthood and its social and psychological effects — economic and political marginalization, a loss of purpose, emotional vulnerability and wholesale disaffiliation from the Church. Recent research has shed light on the developmental task of young adults, the nature of young adult religious faith in Protestant and Catholic traditions, predominant fears that affect the religious life of young adults, and other factors that support and inhibit faith. In addition to this social science research, congregations across the country are conducting their own experiments with young adults, and it will be increasingly important for academics and Church leaders to attend carefully to their successes and failures. There will assuredly not be one monolithic version of congregational ministries with young adults; more likely a thousand flowers will bloom and we will need to do the work of cataloguing such flourishing.

For those seeking to further the craft of ministering with young adults, specifically through academic research, this survey provides a series of snapshots, not a seamless portrait without gaps. In a sense, this review article raises quite as many questions as it answers — concerning the particularity of young adults and the particularity of the gospel. For example, how are these changing social conditions that prolong adolescence among the middle class experienced among underclass young people? How does this research on emerging adulthood shed light on the burgeoning prison population, especially among African American males? What should be the Church's political response to social structures that limit and distort young adulthood? Given the failure of these social structures to support young people, what alternate strategies might the Church engage for fostering purpose, moral literacy, or social responsibility? What strategies exist for helping young adults confront their "fears of falling" that inhibit social compassion or prophetic faith? On the other hand, if we are concerned to provide a witness of a gospel that cannot be reduced to Moral Therapeutic Deism or to American moral culture, what forms make more vivid the beauty of the gospel — what stories? forms of worship? practices? Tom Beaudoin observed that contemporary young people are no longer convinced by arguments, but instead are recruited by experiences. What experiences or practices can the Church provide that reliably invites young adults to life ordered by paschal rhythms? Most importantly, if we take seriously the challenge of providing such relationships and resources for young adults, what will be required of us — as hospitable communities of practice, mentors, theologians, story tellers, artists and activists?

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