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A Review of “Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults”

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Souls in Transition: The Religious & Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults
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Research on the development of adolescents tends to disregard their religious and spiritual lives. Although most scholars and practitioners in higher education may possess opinions on the meaning and development of religion for traditionally aged college students, few have conducted the research to assert, or in some cases controvert, those notions. In Souls in Transition, Christian Smith and Patricia Snell attempt to partially fill this unfortunate gap, and the resulting work is accordingly a significant contribution to the field. Smith and Snell argue that "religious outcomes are simply not so random that sociologists with the right tools cannot make sense of why and for whom they tend to occur" (p. 282). Therefore, their book exemplifies how such tools can be utilized to identify important trends in the religious development of emerging adults—a term they prefer over adolescents to more accurately describe 18–29-year-olds.

Souls in Transition is a sequel to Soul Searching (Smith & Denton, 2005), with both books based upon the National Study of Youth and Religion, a telephone survey followed by personal interviews of American adolescents. The first phase of this study, conducted from 2001 to 2005, surveyed 3,290 adolescents from ages 13 to 17, followed by personal interviews with 267 of the participants. The findings are what comprise Soul Searching, a book in which Smith and Denton (2005) break stereotypes about America’s adolescents, such as the myth that parents cease to matter to the development of their children as they become teenagers.

Souls in Transition emerges from a third phase of the research, with a subsequent survey and personal interviews of the same group five years later (ages 18–23). Smith and Snell discover through their research that the largest proportion of emerging adults tends not to change religiously from their early teenage years, the second largest group tends to decline in faith, and a small percentage increases religiously.

The framework for Smith and Snell’s writing trends from the very specific to the more general and back to the more specific. They begin by describing in-depth interviews with three individuals who each broadly capture the diversity and similarities of America’s emerging adults. After then illustrating the lives of emerging adults and their cultural worlds, Smith and Snell compare the religious views of emerging adults to earlier generations. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 respectively share the findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion, identify key themes that capture the religious beliefs of emerging adults, and provide a typology of six major religious categories for emerging adults, ranging from irreligious to committed traditionalists.
For those who have read *Soul Searching*, chapter 7 revisits specific cases five years later, now that adolescents from the first phase of research have developed into emerging adults. In chapter 8, Smith and Snell utilize multivariate regression and qualitative comparison analyses to identify factors that shape the trajectories of the religious beliefs of adolescents transitioning into emerging adulthood. They conclude their book by demonstrating the links between faith and positive adult life outcomes and what these findings mean for understanding the religious beliefs of this important population in American society.

A multitude of offerings can be found from *Souls in Transition*. Perhaps the most apparent of these is the description of emerging adulthood as a new life phase. Although Smith and Snell did not invent the term (they credit psychologist Jeffrey Arnett for persuading them of its usefulness), they describe how four macro changes in American society led to the birth of this new life stage: (a) the rapid growth of enrollment in higher education, (b) the delay of marriage for young adults, (c) low job security and subsequent frequent job changes, and (d) the extension of parental financial support to children at older ages. These four social changes provide emerging adults with unprecedented freedom, and as Smith and Snell state: “Emerging adults are determined to be free. But they do not know what is worth doing with their freedom” (p. 294).

If emerging adulthood as a new life phase is the most apparent contribution of the book, explaining why religion matters to this age group is the most important. Emerging adults know that there is more to life than what many of them have discovered, and they desire help in understanding the “more.” Perhaps contrary to popular opinion, Smith and Snell find that where emerging adults end up in their religious beliefs and commitments is largely associated with their religious experiences, commitments, and upbringings in the adolescent years. They also provide the five most important predictors of religious commitment from the adolescent to emerging adulthood years: (a) personal prayer, (b) parental religious commitment, (c) importance of faith, (d) religious doubts, and (e) personal religious experiences. Smith and Snell supply substantial evidence that religion matters in ways that make a direct impact in the lives of emerging adults. In fact, they demonstrate that higher religious commitment correlates with more positive outcomes in relationships, attitudes, behaviors, and experiences for 18–23-year-olds.

Methodologically, Smith and Snell meet a high standard for research while providing something for everyone. Their work distinguishes between sound social science, poorly conducted survey research, and “the claims of cultural and religious activists who are pushing their own agendas” (p. 297). Qualitative researchers will appreciate the vivid case studies and the admitted difficulty of converting the stories of unique individuals into themes that provide an overarching perspective of emerging adults and faith development. By contrast, quantitative researchers will enjoy the well-implemented utilization of robust statistical analyses to identify patterns in the data. The appendices provide sufficient detail to understand how the authors conducted the study and came to their conclusions. It is rare for a book to take a mixed methods approach and still maintain such a high standard, and the result may help scholars understand and appreciate methodologies outside of their typical repertoire.

In all the ways Smith and Snell convey the religious development of emerging adults and the tension facing social institutions that attempt to engage them, it is both surprising and disappointing that the authors fail to connect their findings to the missions of faith-based colleges. Mentions of higher education are sporadic at best, especially considering that all participants are 18–23-year-olds. Smith and Snell correctly note that most of American society is not interested in direct religious socialization, but incorrectly suggest that this important task depends upon
individual family households and religious congregations without a reference to faith-based colleges. The result is a missed opportunity to both acknowledge what America’s faith-based higher education institutions attempt to accomplish and to make a plea for these institutions to approach their missions with increased vigor.

Although not explicitly stated, Smith and Snell’s research nonetheless has many implications for faculty and administrators. They note that, contrary to previous decades, higher education no longer negatively influences the religious faith of students. However, readers can also use this book to understand the potential colleges possess to actually increase such faith. As an example, Smith and Snell note that outward religious practices influence inner spiritual formation. Thus, it seems that the religious practices that faith-based colleges encourage can and do make a difference for emerging adults. Furthermore, Smith and Snell emphasize the powerful role nonparental adults can play in the lives of emerging adults, even in some cases substituting for parents as formative influences. Although many emerging adults lean toward mass consumerism and do not take initiative in their own spiritual development, they are open to the initiative taken by others. Therefore, Souls in Transition is not only helpful in its in-depth description of today’s 18–23-year-olds and their religious development, but also in its call for older adults, such as those who work on a college campus, to more purposefully take responsibility for that development.

REFERENCE