

COPYRIGHT NOTICE:

**Robert Wuthnow: After the Baby Boomers**

is published by Princeton University Press and copyrighted, © 2007, by Princeton University Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.

Follow links for Class Use and other Permissions. For more information send email to: [permissions@pupress.princeton.edu](mailto:permissions@pupress.princeton.edu)

## American Religion

### AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

OBSERVERS OF AMERICAN RELIGION have been keenly interested in baby boomers for a long time. Baby boomers were the future of the church. When they were young, they were supposed to have radicalized it with new ideas about race, gender, and social justice. Soon, though, prognosticators started seeing baby boomers as a “drop out” generation. Their dropping out was leaving congregations with fewer members. Then observers decided that baby boomers were coming back—but on their own terms, less interested in helping and more intent on finding themselves.

Many of these predictions were accurate, although some became more evident in retrospect than at the time. For one thing, baby boomers were a large cohort. They influenced American religion in sheer volume. As children in the 1950s, they encouraged their parents to attend church in record numbers and to view congregations as extensions of their families. As teenagers in the 1960s, they did start leaving the churches in droves. They were alienated from the “establishment” and more interested in civil rights demonstrations or campus protests than going to Sunday school. Later on, they became more individualistic and conservative, starting their own families and working hard at their jobs. Some of them flocked to megachurches where they could worship without the stale trappings of their parents’ religion. Others became interested in evangelical politics, while still others explored New Age spirituality and new styles of meditation. In many ways, they did leave American religion different from the way they found it. Religious leaders were right in thinking that baby boomers’ influence was a significant phenomenon to be understood.<sup>1</sup>

But things have changed. Baby boomers are no longer the future of American religion. As they grow older, they are rapidly becoming its past. The future now rests with younger adults. Baby boomers are now moving past their mid-life crises, becoming empty nesters, and retiring. To be sure, their influence on American religion remains strong. With the graying of America, they will be the most numerous group in the typical congregation. They will have more time to serve on committees and more money to put in the collection plate. They will also be the members who lament that things are no longer as good as they were in the 1960s (or 1980s).

They will not be so sure that change is a good thing, especially if it is being advanced by someone considerably younger than they are. Baby boomers will also increasingly be high-maintenance members. Besides populating the pews, they will require sick-visits from the pastor. As they die, or move away to retirement communities and nursing homes, they will leave the leadership of American religion in other hands.

Those hands will necessarily be younger. The future of American religion is in the hands of adults now in their twenties and thirties. As a percentage of the population, this age group is smaller than the baby boomer generation was. It is also less distinctly defined. Some observers call it Generation X or Generation Y (or both). Some refer to its members as “millennials,” noting that they differ from baby boomers in having come of age around the turn of the millennium. Still others refer to it simply as the “next wave.” Whatever the rubric, one thing is clear: younger adults are not only the future of American religion; they are already a very significant part of it. They are at least a sizable minority of most congregations. They are the young families who look to congregations for guidance in raising their children. They are the low-income families trying to balance tight budgets, hectic work schedules, and parenting. They are the young singles with time and energy to do volunteer work and look for companionship. They are the “unchurched” friends and co-workers struggling with questions about whether to be religiously involved at all. And because they have been overshadowed by the baby boomers, this current generation of younger adults is not very well understood, either by religious leaders or by scholars. Their lifestyles have seldom been scrutinized, and little is known about their church going habits, their spiritual interests and needs, and how their faith affects their families, their politics, and their communities. The need for better information about young adults is thus urgent for the present as well as the future.<sup>2</sup>

In the absence of solid information, speculation about the religious needs and interests of the next wave runs rampant. Self-styled cultural experts have been arguing that young adults will be the leaders of a great spiritual revival. Now that we have attained the material comforts afforded by middle-class incomes, say these experts, people will inevitably turn to spiritual quests. Other forecasters are placing their bets on technology. Persuaded that religion is somehow a function of gadgets and electronics, they predict an Internet revolution in which congregations will be replaced by Web sites and chat rooms. Still others see in their crystal balls that young adults will flock to jeans-and-sweatshirt ministries where everything is warm and supportive—as if that were something new.

The truth is, these futuristic speculations make headlines, but seldom make sense. The reason is that they are the product of someone’s imagination, rather than being grounded in any systematic research—or, for that

matter, a very good understanding of young adulthood and social change. Pastors and interested lay readers can titillate themselves reading such speculation in religious magazines. But they need to realize how flimsy this sort of information is. If their mechanic knew as little about engines as this, their car would scarcely make it around the block. But then their mechanic probably would not be intent on making headlines, either.

#### HOW TO THINK ABOUT YOUNGER ADULTS

We need to begin by thinking more carefully about the place of younger adults in our society and their role in social change. The emphasis on baby boomers over the past few decades has conditioned us to think in terms of generations and, beyond that, to understand generations in a rather distinct way. Until recently, a generation was defined the same way a genealogy was: by the succession backwards from parents to grandparents to great grandparents, or ahead from parents to children to grandchildren. Each unit in that succession is a generation. Conceived this way, generations help us keep track of our ancestors and descendants. The problem with this way of thinking about generations comes when we want to make broader generalizations about historical events and social change. My father may have been born in 1920, yours in 1925, and someone else's in 1930, making it hard to say anything of a general nature about how we were affected by the Great Depression or World War II.

The baby boomer concept of generations is different. It suggests that people are largely defined by some major event or attribute that they have in common, even though their exact birth dates are different.<sup>3</sup> This definition emphasizes the fact that people a few years apart in chronological age will have the same cultural outlook if they have been exposed at roughly the same formative time in their lives to something as major as a war or a significant technological innovation.<sup>4</sup> For instance, baby boomers are often defined as people born between 1946 and 1964 because there was a noticeable bulge in the annual birth rate during these years. It mattered less, according to this definition, that one person was born in the late 1940s and another in the early 1960s, or that one person's parents might have been born in the early 1920s and another's in the early 1940s than the fact that they were members of a large birth cohort. This, in turn, mattered because a large birth cohort affected many of the experiences these people would have throughout their lives. For example, they might attend over-crowded classrooms in grade school or go to newly built schools as children, they might have the same experience of over-crowding when they went to college, and they might find it harder to get a job when they graduated or find that retailers were pitching products to them because they were such

a sizable share of the market. In addition, this way of thinking about generations proved attractive because baby boomers were shaped by distinct developments in the wider society. These included, for instance, the emergence of rock 'n roll in the late 1950s and the Vietnam war in the late 1960s and early 1970s as an event that threatened lives and polarized campuses.

Baby boomers are not the only generation that can be defined in this sociological way. Other generations in American history can also be identified by a conjuncture of when they were born and the historical events they experienced. It makes sense, for example, to speak of baby boomers' parents as the World War II generation or in some cases as the Great Depression generation (or some combination of the two). World War II was the defining event for Americans who were young adults at the time. Although its economic and emotional impact influenced all age groups, it especially affected the lives of younger Americans. They were the soldiers who risked their lives on the battlefield, the wives who stayed at home worrying about their husbands, and the couples who waited to marry or have children until the war was over. In discussions of generations, those who were young adults during World War II or the Great Depression have thus come to be referred to sometimes as "builders." The term not only provides an alliterative reference alongside "boomers," but points to the fact that people in this generation tended to save their money because of having lived during the Great Depression and became involved in their communities and churches because of the patriotism they learned during World War II.

This way of thinking about generations has proven attractive, too, for understanding earlier periods in American history. For instance, the so-called Jazz Age or Roaring Twenties can be understood as a period of cultural history that particularly influenced younger people. Doing so emphasizes the fact that young adults at the time were more likely to have been influenced by the music or the changes in fashion and sexual mores than older people were. In American religious history, generational analysis has proven useful in understanding developments during the 1830s and 1840s known as the "Great Revival" or "Second Great Awakening." The revival meetings that became popular in these years included people of all ages, but were especially effective at reaching younger adults on the expanding western frontier. These people had moved away from their parents on the Eastern seaboard or had immigrated from Europe. They were separated in these ways from the influences of family traditions and were interested in forming their own institutions. New denominations, new religious movements, and new political movements were the result.<sup>5</sup>

For all these reasons, it is understandable that current observers of younger adults have tried to describe them as a distinct generation with an identity shaped by the confluence of their coming of age and developments in the wider world. Generation X became a popular rubric for awhile be-

cause it described a birth cohort that apparently did not have a clear identity and was searching for one. Those who enjoyed the alliteration of “builders” and “boomers” coined the term “busters” to describe this next generation, taking their cue from the fact that this birth cohort was smaller than the previous one. The term “millennials” pointed to the fact that younger adults were coming of age around the year 2000. It also presumed that the widely anticipated Y2K crisis was actually a life-shaping event, and it emphasized other developments such as the spread of personal computers and the Internet or the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York and Washington.

However, there are two reasons to be skeptical about this way of describing younger adults. One is that there is simply no evidence that younger adults currently have been decisively shaped by a particular historical event in the same way that the baby boomers were by the Vietnam war or by their parents waiting until after World War II to marry and have children. Those events had major effects on family life and personal life which, in turn, shaped how people participated in religious organizations. In fact, it was these effects on family life and personal life that mattered most, not simply having been born during a certain period. Thus, baby boomers were actually quite diverse, differing from one another as much as from their parents. Some married young, settled down and raised children, and made friends in their neighborhoods and churches. Others married later or did not marry at all, had no children or fewer children, and led more transient lives. Their religious practices were deeply influenced by these differing lifestyles. As I will show, the same is true for younger adults today. Most of what shapes their religious behavior is what happens in their families and at work, and these influences vary dramatically even for people who came of age at the same time. The other reason for being skeptical of generational language is that popular usages of it strain to draw contrasts with baby boomers, but in doing so are misleading. For instance, one reads in the popular literature that the millennial generation is supposedly defined by an interest in small fellowship groups that meet for prayer and Bible study during the week at churches or in homes. But precisely the same argument was made about baby boomers and, in fact, research has shown that baby boomers did gravitate to these groups.<sup>6</sup> Thus, it is hard to see why millennials should be identified on these grounds as a distinct generation. Similar claims are sometimes made about the distinctive interest of younger adults in personal experience as opposed to creeds or in novel liturgical styles. The next wave is said to be more interested in first-hand experience than anything else. Yet that was also said about baby boomers. The popular literature also makes arguments about “emerging” congregations that are somehow the wave of the future because they follow a new paradigm or hark back to models from the first century of Christian-

ity. These discussions are tantalizing. They suggest to church leaders that if they only follow some new pattern, their congregation will attract young adults and grow. But we need to be skeptical about these arguments. Usually they are drawn from the personal experience of a few people, rather than from respectable research. Moreover, they seem strained because they seek to define a new generation by identifying something distinctive about it, instead of recognizing both the variability among younger adults and the continuities between the present and the past.

For these reasons, I will use the phrase *younger adults* (or simply *young adults*) to characterize the population of interest here. If readers need a sound bite, they are free to use words like busters and millennials. But they need to understand clearly whom I am describing. In subsequent chapters, I will present evidence mostly about younger adults who were between the ages of 21 and 45 in the years from about 1998 to 2002 and sometimes in comparison with younger adults of the same age between 1972 and 1976. This, of course, is an inclusive definition of younger adulthood. It corresponds statistically with the first *half* of adulthood for most Americans—the half when they are indeed young adults. It also provides the comparisons we need to make among people who are single or married, childless or with children, unsettled in their work or settled, and so on. By the time they are 21, most adults are to some degree “on their own,” so to speak, meaning that they are no longer in high school or college and are earning at least part of their own livings. Yet, as we shall see, the maturational tasks of marrying, becoming parents, and becoming established in a career are taking longer now than in the past. By the time they are 45, most Americans have accomplished these tasks, if they are ever going to accomplish them. But for many Americans, these tasks are happening in their thirties, rather than in their twenties.

Americans between the ages of 21 and 45 are not just a harbinger of the future. They *are already* a significant share of the population. The major life decisions they are making about spouses, children, work, and religion are ones they will make during these critical young adult years, not earlier, and not later. Of course these decisions are influenced by how people are raised and what they learned in high school. But it is a mistake to think that we can somehow understand the decisions and interests of young adults by studying teenagers.<sup>7</sup> It is also mistaken to focus on college students—which is a growing, but still small segment of the young adult population. As interesting as those studies are, they cannot tell us whether it matters religiously, for instance, if someone marries at the age of twenty-one, waits until age thirty, or does not marry at all. The same is true for decisions about parenting and careers. And just because a young person espouses certain political ideas in high school, that does not tell us very much about how a person will actually vote a decade later, or how that person’s political

opinions will be influenced in the interim by his or her religious beliefs when that person is thirty.

In practical terms, young adulthood presents very significant challenges, both to the men and women who are facing them and to religious and community leaders. Most high school students, for instance, say they value marriage and expect to be married when they become adults. Yet a growing number of young adults do not marry, marry later, or do not stay married. Those are the realities of life that pose worries during young adulthood, affect one's self-identity, and cause people to seek emotional support. Apart from the personal issues such realities raise, they also affect religious organizations and the wider society. Church planners need to take into consideration how many young adults there are in the society and whether they are as active in their congregations as young adults were a generation ago. This is not to say that religious leaders should ignore the needs and interests of older Americans. However, the needs and interests that face people in younger adulthood are sufficiently different to warrant careful consideration in their own right.

#### THE POPULATION OF YOUNG ADULTS

Younger adults make up a sizable proportion of the American population. We gain a sense of their numbers in figure 1.1. The figure shows the total population of the United States over roughly the past seven decades broken down by age group. The age groups reported by the U.S. Census are not exactly the same as those I will be using, but are close enough. Over the period shown, the total U.S. population grew from 121.8 million in 1929 to 288.6 million in 2002. If, for the time being, we consider a generation to have been approximately 30 years, then the total population was about 80 million larger in 2002 than it was a generation ago in 1972, an increase of nearly 40 percent. The significance of the baby boom generation is evident in the bulge that begins to appear in the under age five category around 1947 and that continues in this age group until around 1964. As the baby boomers grew up, their effect is evident in the widening of the band for five- to fifteen-year-olds between the late 1950s and early 1970s, and then for older age groups in subsequent years. The figure also demonstrates, though, that it is misleading to emphasize the baby boom generation's importance simply on the basis of numbers. For instance, there were about the same number of children under age five in 2002 as there were of that age at the high point of the baby boom in 1961. Indeed, the number of young children in the United States during the 1990s was about the same as it was in the 1960s. More to the point, younger adults were considerably more numerous in 2002 than they were in 1972. To be exact, there

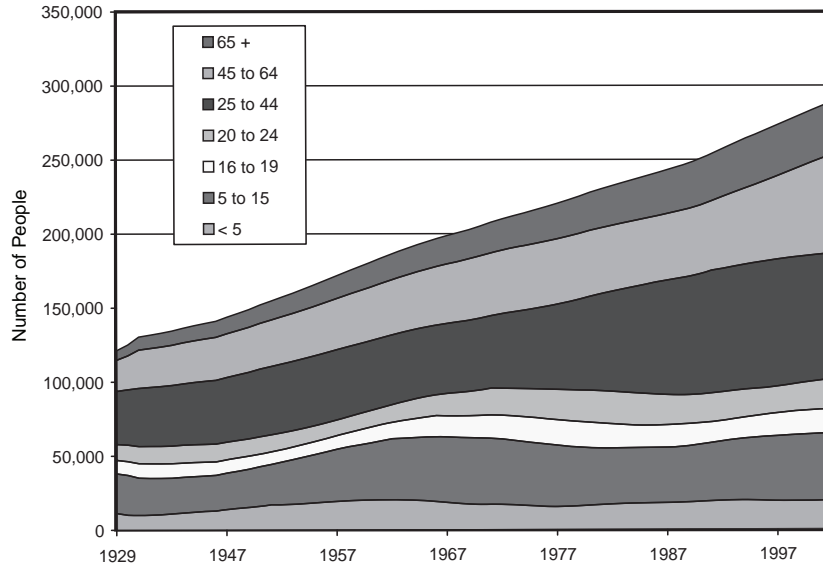


Figure 1.1. U.S. Population by Age Groups. Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

were 105.3 million Americans between the ages of 20 and 44 in 2002, compared with only 68.6 million in 1972. Or, if only 20- to 24-year-olds are considered, there were 20.3 million in that age group in 2002, compared with 18.1 million in 1972. Of course, another way to think about the significance of age groups is their *proportion* of the population. Absolute size notwithstanding, they may have more influence on the economy or on political decisions if their proportion is larger. By this indication, younger adults are also more important now than they were a generation ago. In 2002, Americans age 20 to 44 made up 36.5 percent of the total population, compared with 32.7 percent in 1972.<sup>8</sup>

There is another way of thinking about younger adults that is especially important when considering their role in American religion and the ministries of religious organizations to them. It is the *adult* population of the United States that supplies the potential pool of members, volunteers, and donors on which the vitality of American religion depends. Observers of American religion sometimes emphasize the increasing importance of older adults in making these arguments. Older adults may have more time and money, and, as longevity and health improve, there may be more older people to do the work and give the money on which religious organizations depend. That view, however, is shortsighted. The truth is that younger adults are just as important to the future of religious organizations, if not more so, than older adults. This potential can be seen from their share in the population. In 2002, adults age 20 to 44 made up 50.7 percent of the

adult population of the United States. Not only was that a significant proportion; it was also approximately the same as it had been thirty years earlier (51.8 percent). In short, the so-called graying of the American population should not be emphasized at the expense of understanding the importance of younger adults. As a proportion of the adult population, younger adults are just as important now as they were a generation ago, and in absolute terms, they are a significantly larger group now than then.

#### COMING OF AGE AT FORTY

But is it legitimate to include people up to their mid-forties when talking about younger adults? When baby boomers were coming of age in the early 1970s, there was a popular saying that people over 30 were too old to be understood—or trusted. At that time, developmental psychologists argued that people pretty much established their adult identity during their late teens and were already fully formed adults by their twenty-first birthday. By the time they were in their thirties or early forties, they were probably going through a mid-life crisis, and soon after were thinking about retirement, declining health, and death. Religious organizations typically planned their programs with the same expectations about life cycle development. Confirmation took place around age twelve or thirteen on grounds that the person was sufficiently an adult to make an informed decision about joining the congregation. Confirmation classes were followed by a youth group or youth ministry of some kind that provided opportunities for peer interaction, instruction, and dating. For those who went off to college, campus ministries sometimes served a similar purpose. But for the adults in a typical congregation, the dividing point was usually between those in their twenties, who were single or married without children, and those in their late twenties or early thirties and beyond who were raising children. The younger adults were thus a small group, compared to the “real” adults, whose numbers included everyone from at least age thirty through retirement.

That was a view of the typical life cycle that made sense in the 1950s or 1960s, but it no longer makes sense today. One of the reasons it does not is that people are living longer now than they did a generation ago. Figure 1.2 shows how average life expectancy in the United States changed during the twentieth century. In 1900, life expectancy at birth was only 46.3 years for men and 48.3 years for women. Except for 1918, when life expectancy dropped dramatically because of the flu epidemic, average life expectancy has risen steadily, in large measure because of a reduction in childhood diseases and through the development of vaccines and antibiotics. By 1950, average life expectancy for men was 65.6 years and for women 71.1 years.

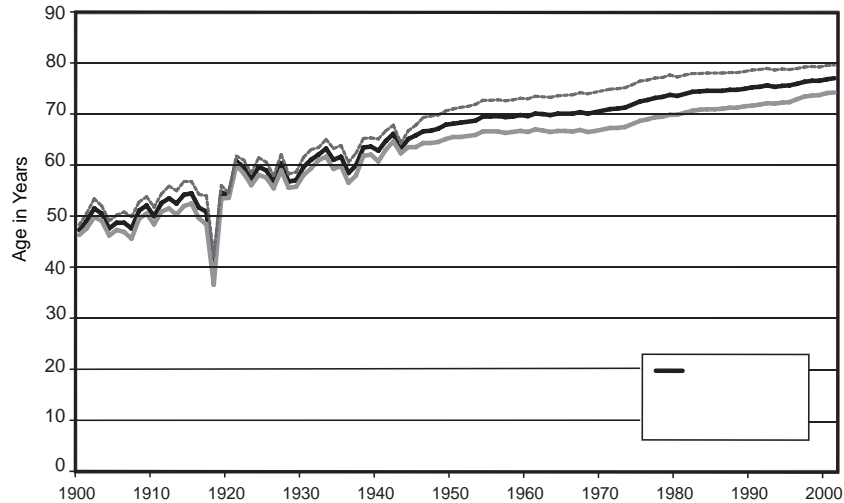


Figure 1.2. Life Expectancy at Birth. Source: U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, Vital Statistics of the United States.

In 1970, it was 67.1 years for men and 74.7 years for women. And in 2000, it was 74.3 years for men and 79.7 years for women. During the last half of the twentieth century, therefore, average life expectancy for American men and women increased by more than eight years.

The increase in life expectancy means that the *midpoint* of adult life for Americans age 21 and over is now reached at age 49. That figure is up from a midpoint of age 44 in 1950. Statistically, it means that younger adulthood could now be thought of as extending from age 21 through age 49, and older adulthood reaching from age 49 to age 77. Just as greater longevity has meant more time in later life to do things such as start a second career or travel, greater longevity also means more time in younger adulthood to do things that used to be compressed into a shorter number of years. Whereas it may have seemed urgent at one time to start a family at age 18 if one were to see one's children grow to maturity by the time one died, people can now wait longer to start families. They can also take longer to decide on a line of work and it may, in fact, take them longer to achieve financial independence.

Whether people actually postpone some of the developmental tasks they used to accomplish earlier is a question we shall consider in greater detail in the next chapter. To anticipate that discussion, though, let me say here that many younger adults *are postponing* some of these developmental tasks. According to the authors of a major collaborative project on early adulthood funded by the MacArthur Foundation, "it does indeed take much longer to make the transition to adulthood today than [it did a few] decades

ago.” Comparing statistics in 2000 with statistics in 1960, the researchers found, for instance, that completing all the major transitions (leaving home, finishing school, becoming financially independent, getting married, and having a child) was achieved by only 46 percent of women and 31 percent of men age 30 in 2000, compared with 77 percent of women and 65 percent of men of the same age in 1960.<sup>9</sup>

A twenty-seven-year-old man who works nights as a custodian and takes college classes during the day illustrates some of these processes. After high school, he went away to college, but spent the year partying and making bad grades because he had never been away from home before and had no idea what he wanted to do in life. He then worked for four years at a supermarket. Some of this time he still lived at home. He switched jobs several times and lived in several different states. For the past five years, he has been working his way through college, but not progressing as quickly as he would like. He gets depressed and wishes he had more self-discipline. Because he works at night and is on campus during the day, he seldom sees any of the people who live in his apartment complex. His friends are mostly buddies he worked with at the supermarket and who are now scattered or are people he has met in classes. On weekends, he gets together with a friend to shoot pool, goes fishing by himself, or visits his parents. He would get married if he met the right person, he says, but financially and emotionally, he isn't ready. Another man in his late twenties offered an interesting perspective: “In ten years, I'll be thirty-eight and that sounds really old to me,” he said. “I would like to get married. Maybe have kids. But I don't know anymore. My life is so open right now. I just don't know.”

As we will see in the next chapter, one of the most important changes among young adults is that they are indeed marrying later and having children later. These changes, together with the fact that many younger adults are taking longer to establish themselves in their careers and to settle into their communities, means that any religious activities that are influenced by these developmental tasks may also be happening later. Of course we must also take account of ways in which younger adults may be accomplishing developmental tasks earlier than in the past. For instance, more teenagers are probably sexually active than was true a generation ago, and some teenagers have had to become psychologically independent at an earlier age because of being raised by single parents. At the same time, the fact that *parents* are living longer may mean that younger adults remain psychologically dependent on their parents for longer periods than at a time when parents died younger.

The one thing that greater longevity overall and the extension of younger adulthood means for thinking about religion is that the future cannot safely be predicted simply by focusing on teenagers. In an earlier period, that might have been the case. If a teenager was part of an effective

youth group, he or she could be expected to move rather quickly from that group at age eighteen to being a married parent a year or two later who participated in the same congregation. It is now more likely that a teenager may drop out of his or her congregation after confirmation at age thirteen and not feel the same urgency about participating again until he or she is a parent at age thirty-five. Meanwhile, the die may have been influenced by childhood upbringing or by the congregation's youth ministry, but most of the important decisions will have been made later. Decisions about marriage, friends, careers, and children will all have been made later. In this sense, more Americans are coming of age at forty than ever before.<sup>10</sup>

#### THE RELIGIOUS SIGNIFICANCE OF YOUNG ADULTS

The relevance of these brief considerations about life cycle and development is that society has always felt it necessary to provide institutions for the support and socialization of its members who were not yet considered adults. Our elementary and secondary schools are the clearest example of such institutions. We invest resources in these institutions because we believe it is important to transmit knowledge to the coming generation. We also expect these institutions to keep pre-adults off the streets and out of the work force. Caretaker institutions of this kind now extend to preschoolers in the form of daycare centers and nursery schools. Increasingly, these institutions also exist for young adults after high school as well. For many younger adults, colleges, universities, and community colleges serve this purpose. For other younger adults, the military does, and for still others, prisons do. Religious congregations have followed suit. Sunday school programs for younger children, and high school or campus ministries for teenagers and young adults provide support and instill values.

The amazing thing about this pattern of support and socialization is that it all comes to a halt about the time a young person reaches the age of twenty-one or twenty-two. After providing significant institutional support for the developmental tasks that occurred before then, we provide *almost nothing* for the developmental tasks that are accomplished when people are in their twenties and thirties. And, since more of those tasks are happening later, this is a huge problem. It means that younger adults are having to invent their own ways of making decisions and seeking support for those decisions. Whereas dating and mate selection used to happen within the social milieu of the high school, congregation, or campus, it now occurs increasingly in bars, at parties, and through the Internet. Other major decisions, such as when to have children and how to raise them, or where to live and what kind of career to pursue, are also being made on an improvisational basis, largely without firm institutional grounding. It is

little wonder that social critics write about the problems associated with *individualism*. In the absence of any institutional sources of support and stability, young adults are forced to be individualistic. They have no other resources but themselves.

Of course, we expect young adults to be independent enough to make their own decisions. I am not suggesting that we develop caretaker institutions for people in their thirties like the ones we have for teenagers. I *am* saying we should have a serious national conversation about the kinds of institutional support young adults do need. Instability in the work force means that young adults can seldom rely on their employers for this kind of support. The emotional and financial support young adults receive from their families is important, but much more available to the wealthy than to the majority. The need for supportive institutions is clearly suggested by the growing numbers of young adults who are overloaded with debt as a result of bad financial decisions. It is evident in continuing high rates of divorce and child abuse. And it is certainly evident in young adults' remarks about feeling uncertain and unsettled. As a thirty-year-old mother in Iowa told the MacArthur project researchers, "I don't know if I'm an adult yet. I . . . still don't feel quite grown up. Being an adult kind of sounds like having things, everything is kind of in a routine and on track, and [I] don't feel like [I'm] quite on track."<sup>11</sup>

Congregations *could* be a valuable source of support for young adults. They *could* be places where young adults gravitate to talk about the difficult decisions they are facing or to meet other people of the same age. Congregations *could* be guiding the career decisions of younger adults or helping them think about their budgets and their personal priorities. But, again to anticipate the evidence in subsequent chapters, this potential is often going unrealized. It will continue to go unrealized as long as congregations invest in youth programs for high school students and assume this is enough. It will also go unrealized if congregational leaders focus on their graying memberships and do not look more creatively to the future.

#### A GENERATION OF TINKERERS

The single word that best describes young adults' approach to religion and spirituality—indeed life—is *tinkering*. A tinkerer puts together a life from whatever skills, ideas, and resources that are readily at hand. In a culture like ours, where higher education and professional training are valued, tinkering may have negative connotations. But it should not. Tinkerers are the most resourceful people in any era. If specialized skills are required, they have them. When they need help from experts, they seek it. But they do not rely on only one way of doing things. Their approach to life is

practical. They get things done, and usually this happens by improvising, by piecing together an idea from here, a skill from there, and a contact from somewhere else.

The French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote of the importance of the *bricoleur* (the tinkerer) in the societies he studied.<sup>12</sup> The *bricoleur* in preindustrial societies is a handy person, a do-it-yourself craftsman who uses the tools of his or her trade and the materials that happen to be at hand to fix things and keep them in good repair. The tools and materials that prove useful today may be different from the ones that were useful yesterday. The tasks of each day nevertheless reflect the past and the lessons one has learned. The objects the *bricoleur* produces are a *bricolage*—a construction improvised from multiple sources.

The key to understanding the life of the *bricoleur* or tinkerer is uncertainty. The tinkerer's life is sufficiently uncertain that it is impossible to solve problems through predefined solutions. A tinkerer does not go to the store and look for exactly the right part that will fix his plow. Instead, he muses about the problem, talks with the neighbors to see if they have ever faced the same difficulty, goes out to the junk pile and finds an old piece of angle-iron and a tin can to cut up, and uses his skills as a craftsman to piece together a makeshift solution.

Our world is filled with the kinds of uncertainty that make tinkering a necessity. Prepackaging and standardization notwithstanding, we constantly face situations that require us to improvise.<sup>13</sup> The path by which each individual seeks a life partner is different from the path anyone else has taken. Marriage counselors and online dating services may help, but the information processed and the decisions made will be unique. Within the same occupation or industry, no two career paths are alike. Making ends meet is less a matter of following some recipe for success and more one of juggling time and work demands, personal interests, and payments. Dealings with friends and family are also a matter of tinkering. Each person is shaped by the unique mix of people with whom he or she comes in contact and in turn makes an ongoing succession of choices about which people to associate with and how much to be influenced by them.

So it is with religion and spirituality. We piece together our thoughts about religion and our interests in spirituality from the materials at hand. Ordinary people are not religious professionals who approach spirituality the way an engineer might construct a building. They are amateurs who make do with what they can. Hardly anybody comes up with a truly innovative approach to life's enduring spiritual questions, but hardly anybody simply mimics the path someone else has taken either. Religion, we might suppose, is fundamentally a hedge against uncertainty. It offers meaning, as Clifford Geertz has observed, where there was no meaning.<sup>14</sup> Yet its meanings are seldom final. They depend on faith, and faith implies the

possibility of new insights, surprises, and growth. A centuries-old creed may be a succinct statement of what a person of faith should believe. Making sense of the implications of that creed, though, is an act of tinkering.

The possibilities for tinkering increase with the expansion of available information and exposure to diverse cultures and networks. Like the farmer rummaging through the junk pile for makeshift parts, the spiritual tinkerer is able to sift through a veritable scrap heap of ideas and practices from childhood, from religious organizations, classes, conversations with friends, books, magazines, television programs, and Web sites. The tinkerer is free to engage in this kind of rummaging. Especially in young adulthood, the institutional constraints that might prevent it are absent. The directives given by one's parents are fewer. One's circle of friends is wider and one's knowledge of the world is greater. The structure provided by schooling, teachers, and the regimen of adolescent cliques is gone.

Bricolage is thus an apt description of the religion and spirituality of young adults. Bricolage implies the joining together of seemingly inconsistent, disparate components. The rusted angle-iron and tin can are from different sources, perhaps bound together only by an old strand of barbed wire. What at first seems like a straightforwardly orthodox belief, such as the view that the Bible is inerrant, turns out to be a jumble of orthodoxy and more relativistic assumptions about truth, salvation, and civility. Each person is a tinkerer. Each individual claims the authority—in fact, the duty—to make up his or her mind about what to believe. Slippage creeps in between the teachings of religious organizations and the practices of individuals. One teaches that premarital sex is always wrong; the other assumes this teaching does not apply to me.

To describe a generation of tinkerers implies, ironically, that a pastiche of metaphors is also required. Bricolage is an umbrella, handy because it is easy to carry wherever one goes. The way tinkerers put together their lives, though, involves a veritable plethora of activities that cannot be so easily classified. This is where the metaphors that observers have invented to describe American religion are both useful and misleading. Consider the idea of mosaic. American religion is sometimes described as a mosaic because it is composed of many different traditions.<sup>15</sup> Even a particular person's faith may be the product of parents and grandparents from different traditions. Mosaic is helpful in its connotation of diversity and the piecing together of this diversity. Yet it is too stable and coherent to capture the fluidity and uncertainty of contemporary life. Another metaphor is seeking.<sup>16</sup> Spiritual seekers are looking for answers. This is surely an important part of tinkering. Seeking implies uncertainty, for if a person already had answers, there would be no need to seek. Seeking, though, implies more unsettledness than may be present. Life may be a pastiche with which a person is content.

The economic metaphors that are sometimes used to describe contemporary spirituality are similarly helpful and misleading. To say that people participate in a religious economy or marketplace points to the fact that there is a world of suppliers competing to provide just the goods and services for which a tinkerer may be looking.<sup>17</sup> Today's tinkerers go to the supermarket as well as the scrap heap. Yet not all of their behavior takes place in the market. Young adults who "shop" for a new church are doing something very similar in intentionality and in dealing with competitors hawking goods to what shoppers do when purchasing a house or an automobile. Church hopping, though, is quite different from church shopping. Going to a church one week because of visiting one's parents in another city and a different church on another occasion with a friend is no more participating in a "market" than visiting one's parents or friends on other occasions is. The idea that spirituality can be understood as "rational-choice" behavior is similarly helpful, but limited.<sup>18</sup> Tinkerers undoubtedly make choices that are rational, if rationality means trying to get the job done and make the best use of the resources at one's disposal. It may be rational to choose a religion that promises eternal life in heaven, for instance, if one is convinced that the alternative is to spend eternity in hell. But the fact that many other people opt for different belief systems makes them no less rational. It rather begs the question of rationality to the point that rationality becomes meaningless apart from the cultural assumptions we make about it. Spirituality is sometimes the product of rational choices and sometimes the result of contingencies and influences that involve no choices at all.

The tinkering typical of young adults is hardly distinctive to this particular generation. To suppose so would be to overlook the extent to which baby boomers—and members of previous generations, for that matter—engaged in spiritual tinkering. The social environment in which contemporary tinkering takes place is nevertheless composed of distinctive features. The fact that young adulthood stretches over a longer period of time is one of these trends. When young adults at the start of the twentieth century waited longer to marry, their experience was different than it is now. Life expectancy, sexuality, gender roles, and relationships with parents are all different. The uncertainties young adults currently face at work, in relation to foreign competition, and financially are also distinctive, not because young adults in previous generations were free of economic worries, but because the particular shape of these concerns is now different. Religion and spirituality bear strong continuities with the past. Yet the life worlds of young adults today and their thinking about spirituality pose challenges for religious organizations that need to be understood, not historically, but in terms of the practical realities with which religious leaders are now faced.

## AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

A central argument of this book is that unless religious leaders take younger adults more seriously, the future of American religion is in doubt. The reasons for this argument will become clear as we proceed. Younger adults are already less actively involved in their congregations than older adults are. Not only this, younger adults are currently less involved than younger adults were a generation ago. The demographics behind this declining involvement also do not bode well for the future. Religious involvement is influenced more by whether people are married, when they get married, whether they have children, and how many children they have than almost anything else. Religious involvement is also shaped by how committed people are to their careers and to their communities. All of these social factors have been changing. Religious leaders need to understand these changes. In addition, the *styles* of religious involvement that young adults prefer have also been changing—and not just in the ways that pundits suggest from having scoped out an interesting case here or there. How and how much people practice their faith has important consequences, both for their own lives and for our collective life as a nation.

It may seem overly pessimistic to suggest that the future of American religion is in doubt just because religious leaders are not doing more to enlist the energies of younger adults. Judging from annual statistics on church going produced by the Gallup Organization and other polls, American religion has not fared badly in the past three decades.<sup>19</sup> About the same proportion of the public claims to attend religious services in a given week now as in the early 1970s. To hear journalists tell it, whatever decline may have happened among mainline Protestants and Catholics has been more than made up for by huge growth in evangelical churches. Or, if native-born white Americans are not as active religiously as they once were, then at least new immigrants and African Americans will make up the difference.

We will want to consider these arguments more carefully in the chapters that follow. However, it is again useful to draw a lesson from what was said and what was learned about the future of American religion a generation ago from examining baby boomers. At first, the prospect of serious decline in organized religion seemed inevitable. Young baby boomers were dissatisfied with and uninvolved in organized religion. The more dismal of these forecasts were soon abandoned, however. It appeared that baby boomers were becoming involved again as soon as they married and had children. Even the trendier experiments baby boomers had once favored seemed to be less attractive as baby boomers aged. All this suggested that forecasts of religious decline were a false alarm. To be sure, observers did worry that boomers were perhaps lax in instilling religious values in their children,

and that the piper would still have to be paid at some point in the future. Others, though, posed the reassuring possibility that the children of boomers might *rebel* against their parents by becoming even more religious than the previous generation. The long and the short of it, then, was that religious leaders could go about their business without worrying much about the future. Some analysts even went so far as to suggest that American religion, like American business, would have a rosy future simply because of free market dynamics. Somehow, competition among religious organizations would ensure a bright future.

But there was one undeniable indication of decline: the faltering membership and participation in mainline Protestant churches. These denominations lost between a quarter and a third of their memberships between the 1960s and the 1980s. Some argued that people wanted strict churches and these had become too lax.<sup>20</sup> The better evidence, though, showed that nearly all the decline in mainline denominations was attributable to demographics. Mainline members were better educated and more likely to be middle class or upper-middle class than the rest of the population. As such, mainline members married later, had children later, and had fewer of them. Memberships declined because there were simply fewer children being born into these denominations.<sup>21</sup> Evangelical Protestants, meanwhile, escaped these demographic problems. As long as they kept marrying young and having large families, their growth would make up for the mainline losses. There is just one problem: the same demographics that caused problems for mainline churches are now prevalent in the whole society. Already the growth in evangelicals denominations has diminished. The demographics are affecting how younger adults choose to be religious, and most of these factors will have adverse effects on religious organizations.

I do not mean to suggest that demographic factors are all that matter. American religion is only partly a matter of memberships and attendance. Religious leaders are right when they insist that people take seriously the idea of *faith communities*. Younger adults are no different from older adults in wanting to feel that they are part of a community—whether that is literally a congregation or small group, or a larger tradition such as the Catholic church, Christianity in general, or Judaism. What are the bonds that develop among younger adults? Are congregations a significant part of these social relationships? Are new styles of personal and public religious practice emerging?

Anecdotes are important in answering these questions. The vivid comment of a person during an interview about his or her faith can be especially revealing. So can be an example drawn from a congregation that has had particular success in ministering to younger adults. I will supply some anecdotes of this kind. It is equally important, though, to understand what is happening among younger adults in more systematic terms. We would not

be content understanding what is happening in the economy from listening to an individual tell his or her story of success or failure. Nor should we be content to understand American religion that way. Foundations, religious organizations, and even government agencies have spent millions of dollars in recent years collecting information about religion from the population of the United States. None of this evidence is any harder to understand than the kind one might read in a major newspaper about the stock market or a political poll. It is, though, the kind of evidence that can be enormously helpful in understanding the lives of younger Americans and the role of religion in their lives.