

# Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development

---

Volume 10 | Number 10

Article 13

---

2011

## Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults

Philip D. Byers  
*Bethel University (MN)*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd\\_growth](https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth)



Part of the [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#), [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), [Higher Education Administration Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Byers, Philip D. (2011) "Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults," *Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development*. Vol. 10 : No. 10 , Article 13. Available at: [https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd\\_growth/vol10/iss10/13](https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth/vol10/iss10/13)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Association of Christians in Student Development at Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development by an authorized editor of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact [pillars@taylor.edu](mailto:pillars@taylor.edu).

## Smith, C., & Snell, P. (2009). *Souls in transition: The religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults*

Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Reviewed by Philip D. Byers

Half a century before the term “emerging adult” entered the lexicon of academicians and developmental theorists, C. S. Lewis lamented the state of contemporary culture. Lampooning those theorists who denied the existence of objective good, Lewis (1944) famously opined, “We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise... We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful” (p. 26).

Decades later, the culture has changed. Yet while the text of Christian Smith and Patricia Snell’s *Souls in transition* is significantly less lyrical and more empirical than Lewis’ famous essay, its conclusion is essentially the same: context matters. In this follow-up to Smith and Lundquist-Denton’s landmark work *Soul searching* (2005), Smith and Snell (2009) dispel and diminish common myths about emerging adults, including those purporting massive declines in religious interest and overwhelming self-identification as “spiritual but not religious.” Most importantly, however, Smith and Snell elucidate how every trait of emerging adults – whether positive or negative – is the behavioral fruit of the context into which society has socialized these adults.

Smith and Snell unfold their argument in a systematic fashion, interspersing anecdotes from personal interviews with data from the most recent wave of the longitudinal National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). The majority of the book is empirical. Smith and Snell fill the pages with graphs and tables analyzing emerging adult religion according to religious affiliation (ch. 4), desirable life outcomes (ch. 9), religious trajectory as predicted by previous waves of the NSYR (ch. 8), and in comparison to adults from previous generations (ch. 3). This empirical focus does not deter the authors from illustrating their assertions with case studies, as they examine new subjects (ch. 1) and revisit some from *Soul searching* (ch. 7).

Because so much of the book depends upon quantitative research, methodological critiques are especially pertinent. In her study of sexuality and spirituality among emerging adults, Freitas (2008) critiques Smith’s approach in *Soul searching*, asserting that his methodology is flawed to the extent that it focuses on phone surveys and interviews to the exclusion of written responses. Particularly, Freitas claims that emerging adults raised in a culture hostile to religious faith are subsequently hesitant to communicate authentically in public (p. 54). Even a cursory reading of Smith’s interviews, however, casts doubt on this critique. While the emerging adults in question may have struggled to articulate their beliefs, an objective reviewer could scarcely accuse them of obscurity – vulnerability and transparency, it would appear, are *du jour* in emerging culture.

Likewise, some sociological examinations of religion are critiqued for over-emphasizing *articulation* of belief while ignoring the extent to which religion influences life *behaviors*. While this criticism may be appropriate for some studies, Smith and Snell avoid this pitfall with their emphasis on religion’s connection to desirable life outcomes.

Specifically, the authors examine some of the hottest issues among conscientious emerging adults, including mass consumerism and social concern and action (ch. 9).

Just as *Soul searching* coined the term “moralistic, therapeutic deist” (MTD), Smith and Snell use *Souls in transition* to introduce new religious designations for emerging adults (ch. 6). Avoiding the reductionist generalizations which so commonly stalk discussions of emerging adults, Smith and Snell identify the nuances that distinguish Committed Traditionalists from Selective Adherents or the Spiritually Open. Most helpful are their distinctions between the Religiously Indifferent, the Religiously Disconnected, and the merely Irreligious, distinctions which vividly illustrate what the authors call the “very different religious and spiritual outlooks and orientations” of emerging adults (p. 179). Comprehending the differences between these types of emerging adults will prove valuable for higher education practitioners.

While the explication of the six main religious types of emerging adults is certainly the keystone of the book, one may argue reasonably that the fulcrum upon which the study pivots is comprised of those chapters examining cultural distinctives of emerging adult life. In chapter two, Smith and Snell inspect emerging culture at a broad level before getting specific in chapter five with a thematic examination of emerging adult religion.

Indeed, these are the chapters which form the basis for Smith and Snell’s conclusions and which should most inform conscientious higher education practitioners. Any competent sociologist can proctor surveys, run data, and report findings. The quality which separates true cultural critics from pedestrian reporters, then, is the ability to interpret and analyze those findings, and the authors excel here.

For instance, the authors demonstrate that emerging adults of all religious traditions tend to maintain views of religion which are individualistic and anti-institutional. This finding is interesting, if not novel. Far more fascinating, however, and eminently more helpful is their evaluation of *why* this is so. Noting the cultural victory of the Liberal Protestant ethic, Smith and Snell also root their findings in the influence of evangelical theology on the culture at large. At one point, the authors extend this so far as to argue that these emerging adult values are “simply one cultural mutation away from historic evangelical orthodoxy” (p. 291).

Like Jean Twenge (2006) before them, Smith and Snell demonstrate how today’s emerging adults are little more than products of the society into which adults have socialized them. By itself, this realization would do little more than corroborate what researchers like Twenge and theorists like Jamie Smith (2009) have already posited: cultural practices and values are spiritually and, consequently, behaviorally formative. Smith and Snell make their unique contribution, however, by highlighting the role of parents and other involved adults. Revisiting and corroborating the findings from *Soul searching*, the authors emphasize the matchless potential of parental and adult influence. In their conclusion to the study, Smith and Snell lament how “in the name of individual autonomy... the usually most crucial players in teenagers’ lives [parents] disengage from them precisely when they most need conversation partners” (p. 284). At numerous points within the study, Smith and Snell explicitly implicate other adults as well – the adult influence is not limited to parental involvement.

For higher education practitioners, this book is a source of great hope. If for no reason other than curiosity, educators should engage this treasure trove of statistics and findings of which the above is merely a pittance. More importantly, though, practitioners should

interact with and digest this material as a reminder of the gravity of their vocation. Earlier in the same essay, C. S. Lewis asserted that “the right defence against false sentiments is to inculcate just sentiments” (p. 14). Unlike the cynics who simply deride emerging adults for their flaws, then, *Souls in transition* reminds its readers that they share the responsibility. Seeking to “inculcate just sentiments,” then, practitioners can approach their work empowered by this helpful reminder that they shape context, and context matters.

*Philip D. Byers serves as a Residence Hall Director at Bethel University, MN. He holds a Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development from Taylor University.*

## References

- Freitas, D. (2008). *Sex and the soul*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lewis, C. S. (1944). *The abolition of man*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Smith, C., & Denton, M. L. (2005). *Soul searching: The religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, C., & Snell, P. (2009). *Souls in transition: The religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, J. K. A. (2009). *Desiring the kingdom*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- Twenge, J. M. (2006). *Generation me: Why today's young people are more confident, assertive, entitled – and more miserable than ever before*. New York: Free Press.