



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Articles:

- 📖 Are Emerging Adults
"Spiritual but
Not Religious?"
(*Membership*, pp. 65-72)

Suggested Article:

- 📖 How is the Body Ailing?
(*Membership*, pp. 82-87)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Are Emerging Adults "Spiritual but Not Religious?"

The "spiritual but not religious" category has been an interesting group for congregations to study despite its not being a statistical majority. However, it is far more intriguing to consider the membership implications of four types of emerging adults.

Prayer

O Trinity, our God who is yourself Community and who created us in your image, teach us how to be united under the banner of your love.

Open our eyes and our hearts to see the needs of those sitting beside us in the pew, crossing the street in front of us, and sitting beside us in cubicles and classrooms.

Remind us of your image in us, and draw us to one another. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Luke 8:5-8; 11-15

Meditation¹

Like the Baby Jesus, I need a 'holy family' to belong to. I need to belong to something bigger than myself. If I don't, then I run the risk of developing a sort of God-and-me spirituality with no support systems to hold me up when I am weak, no prophets to challenge me when I am wrong and no party-mates with whom I may celebrate the Lord's goodness in my life.

Mark E. Thibodeaux, S.J.

Reflection

"The transition to adulthood today is more complex, disjointed, and confusing than in past decades," Christian Smith and Patricia Snell Herzog have noted. "The steps through and to schooling, the first real job, marriage, and parenthood are simply less well organized and coherent today than they were in generations past."² The period between adolescence and adulthood (roughly between 18 and 30 years old) is being stretched by the expansion of higher education, the delay of marriage, instability in the work economy, and parents willing to extend financial and other support to their children.

The spiritual and religious lives of emerging adults are often in flux, but not all in the same way. Herzog offers the following typology of their religiosity.

- ▶ *RAAS (religious and also spiritual)* emerging adults are the "committed traditionalists" who embrace, articulate, and regularly practice their faith. Less than 15% of emerging adults are in this category. Most of them were nurtured by parents or adult church members with strong faith.
- ▶ *RBNS (religious but not spiritual)* emerging adults still follow some tenets of their faith out of habit, but they have little personal spiritual connection to these practices. Not wanting to 'rock the boat' with their families over religion, "they continue to practice certain elements, especially those which tend to conflict the least with other mainstream American values, and discard the rest," Herzog writes. About 30% of emerging adults are like this. Because they are "somewhat religiously active," she suggests this group is "the one in need of most attention by faith communities."



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- ▶ *SBNR (spiritual but not religious)* emerging adults are open to spiritual matters, but are not very committed to any religious group. About 15% of emerging adults are in this category. Some are hostile to organized religion, but others have just lost interest and think they do not need a community to nurture their faith. A third *SBNR* subgroup sees value in all religions, but does not give preference to any particular one.
- ▶ *NRNS (not religious, not spiritual)* becomes the largest group (about 40%) of emerging adults, when we combine those that Smith and Herzog call “religiously disconnected,” “religiously indifferent,” and “irreligious.” In the latter two groups are young people whose bad experiences with religious institutions have made them “fairly antithetical to considering religion as either interesting or good.” But those in the first group, the religiously disconnected, seem to have had “shockingly low exposure to people of faith in any context.” Herzog suggests, “for at least a handful of this already small group (approximately five percent of emerging adults), their religiosity may look quite different if anyone in their lives ever simply invited them to a religious activity.”

When emerging adults fail to participate in congregational life, it is a commonplace to write them off as “spiritual but not religious.” But Herzog offers another explanation. “Religiously-attending emerging adults do not on the whole find that their faith communities have something to offer them during this unique life stage,” she observes. They “find themselves to be in between the traditional programming offered for youth and that offered for more established adults through marriage, childrearing, and other later adulthood statuses.” She concludes, “Perhaps then faith communities should be less concerned about whether emerging adults are *SBNR* and instead whether emerging adults are *SUBR*: severely underserved by religion.”

Study Questions

1. Why, according to Patricia Snell Herzog, are congregations focused on the *SBNR* emerging adults to the exclusion of other types? Which type does she urge them to focus on?
2. What significant differences in religiosity exist among the four types of emerging adults? What common patterns do you notice?
3. How might emerging adults respond to the more robust view of church membership that Jeff Cary commends in “How Is the Body Ailing?”
4. How does your congregation welcome and encourage the discipleship of emerging adults? (Be sure to consider their four distinctive patterns of religiosity.) How does it integrate them with faithful adult church members?

Departing Hymn: “One in Jesus”

¹ Mark E. Thibodeaux, S.J., *Armchair Mystic: Easing into Contemplative Prayer* (Cincinnati, OH: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2001), 117.

² Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6.

Are Emerging Adults “Spiritual but Not Religious?”

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To distinguish four broad patterns of religiosity among emerging adults.
2. To consider how emerging adults might respond to a robust view of church membership.
3. To discuss how your congregation can encourage the discipleship of emerging adults.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Membership (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with an Observation

“One of the more tragic elements of American religiosity,” Patricia Snell Herzog writes, “is the extent to which most religious congregations do not offer anything – services, programs, or activities of any kind – that appeal to and are specifically designed to target emerging adults. It is rare that religious congregations even acknowledge the life stage of emerging adulthood and how it differs from the needs of adolescence and adulthood, let alone offer something specifically for this life stage. The trouble then is that there are many emerging adults already in faith communities all over the country who still think they should keep coming, at least sometimes, and yet find very little designed for and connecting them when they do come.” (*Membership*, 72)

Given this neglect by congregations, she thinks it is not surprising that some emerging adults lose spiritual meaning in their church attendance, or drop out altogether. She explores how to encourage the discipleship of these young people who have emerged from adolescence but have not yet entered the institutions and responsibilities of adulthood.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the unison prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 8:5-8; 11-15 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

Discussions of church membership inevitably turn to how congregations are ministering to and using the gifts of this or that group of people. One of the most talked about groups is emerging adults, who are widely believed to be spiritual in some sense, but not committed to practicing their faith through religious institutions. Patricia Snell Herzog complicates this popular image of emerging adulthood in helpful ways

Herzog has collaborated with lead researcher Christian Smith and others to write the book(s) on the religiosity of emerging adults: *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford University Press, 2009) and *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (Oxford University Press, 2011). For more information on their work, see the National Study of Youth and Religion project at www.youthandreligion.org.

Study Questions

1. Patricia Snell Herzog thinks SBNR emerging adults receive attention for two reasons: “One is that they offer a warning to those in faith communities who think most emerging adults are religious (i.e. RAAS or RBNS), and two is that they offer some hope to those in faith communities who think most emerging adults are non-religious (i.e. NRNS).” For the latter reason, some congregations see emerging adults as spiritual seekers who are ripe for conversion and membership. “Some studies claim that this group is on the rise,” she notes, but “as of yet it does not appear to be a rapidly growing category or a statistical majority.”

Herzog urges congregations to focus on retaining RAAS (religious and also spiritual) and deepening the commitment of RBNS (religious but not spiritual) emerging adults. “Most of what appears to sustain membership in these...categories is their social connections to family or to people in faith communities. Thus, continuing their membership over time is especially contingent on not just getting them within religious walls but having something of substance offered once they are there to connect them to others within the congregation. This cannot simply be traditional forms of involvement designed in an era when people moved directly from adolescence to full adulthood. Marriage counseling, parenting classes, or any of the adult forms of programming that congregations typically offer do not appeal to most emerging adults, since many have not yet reached those stages. Furthermore, many do not find religious homes on college campus, and most emerging adults are past college for many years before settling down into later adulthood.”

2. You might divide members into four small groups and ask each group to start from ‘within’ one type in order to look for differences and similarities in the other types. Members might notice differences among the types (and subtypes) in degree of familiarity with and participation in religious practices, attitude toward religious institutions, beliefs about God (or a higher power), and religious experiences. There are similarities across the types as well: emerging adults’ degree of familiarity with and participation in religious practices are often correlated with their connectedness to their parents or other adults’ participation. Their previous experience with religious institutions (positive, negative, or none) plays a major role.
3. Invite members to share their experiences as (or with) emerging adults. Some emerging adults will shy from the responsibilities of church membership; they want to remain untethered during their education, job search, and dating years. But others (RAAS and RBNS) may long for spiritual engagement that is appropriate to their stage in life. Perhaps some emerging adults who are hostile to organized religion (among the SBNR and NRNS) are rejecting the diseased forms of Christianity – consumerist, parochial nationalist, or triumphalist – that Jeff Cary decries, and they will respond positively to the robust view of membership he commends. Perhaps the “religiously disconnected” among the NRNS type will find robust church membership to be winsomely different from the wider culture.
4. Again, you might divide members into four small groups to evaluate your congregational life from the perspective of each type of emerging adult. Do you have worship opportunities, classes, and programs appropriate to the spiritual challenges of emerging adulthood? If so, do these segregate emerging adults, or integrate them with adult church members? Consider how emerging adults enter your congregation – e.g., as children of your adult members, as students residing in your community for a few years, as first-job seekers, as tourists enjoying the natural environment or social life of your community. Are they likely to stay and become adult members of your congregation, or are you preparing them for discipleship in another locale?

Departing Hymn

“One in Jesus” is on pp. 44-45 of *Membership*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.