

DISCERNMENT

Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Volume 7 | Issue 1

Article 3

Book Review: The Twenty-Something Soul: Understanding the Religious and Secular Lives of American Young Adults

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Recommended Citation

Aguilar, Shaya () "Book Review: The Twenty-Something Soul: Understanding the Religious and Secular Lives of American Young Adults," *Discernment: Theology and the Practice of Ministry*. Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/discernment/vol7/iss1/3>

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Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Book Review

The Twenty-Something Soul: Understanding the Religious and Secular Lives of American Young Adults, by Tim Clydesdale and Kathleen Garces-Foley. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019. 242 pages, \$31.00.

Reviewer: Shaya Aguilar

Human beings are hardwired for social connection. While today's twenty-somethings are fiercely independent trailblazers who are leery of conforming to traditions, the longing for spiritual connection, community, and shared experiences continues to fuel their behavior. Though churches across the country claim to prioritize community and interconnection between members of all ages, this proclaimed ideal seems to miss the mark when it comes to engaging today's young adults, especially in a college setting. *The Twenty-Something Soul: Understanding the Religious and Secular Lives of American Young Adults* by Timothy Clydesdale and Kathleen Garces-Foley aims to answer the question facing the church today: "where have all of the twenty-somethings gone?" The book pulls from over 200 individual interviews as well as the National Study of American Twentysomethings (NSAT) that was completed by over 1,800 twenty-something young adults.

The NSAT led to the inception of five religious profiles: abiders, adapters, assenters, avoiders, and atheists. The study demonstrated that religious, spiritual, and secular lives are largely dependent on eight life statuses that are known to come with being a young adult. These eight factors include marriage, cohabitation, becoming a parent, being employed, graduating from college, voting, social connection, and community engagement. While many older adults tend to label young adults as being immature or non-committal, the results from the study demonstrate quite the opposite. In fact, young adults care deeply about their religious lives, and those that avoid responsibility likely would not have been willing to be interviewed.

While the statistical data presented in the book provide a solid framework for understanding the twenty-something soul, personal interviews offer an anecdotal perspective into what compels young adults to commit to church communities as well as the reasons why young adults from a diverse background of denominations choose to invest in their specific communities. The findings from the study and the interviews are divided by denomination, including Catholics, Mainline Protestants, Evangelicals, in addition to those that marked Other religion and Unaffiliated (Nones). Each section of the book highlights that today's young adults are not drawn in by denomination but by factors that are largely independent of theology and tradition.

The first section titled, "*Growing up is Harder to Do*," outlines the unique challenges facing twenty-somethings today, including the difficulty in obtaining a secure career. This challenge of finding a stable career leads many to postpone marriage and having children, which can delay their participation in religious organizations. However, the majority of young adults involved in the study did choose to affiliate with religion in their twenties.

The second section unpacks the spiritual lives of twenty-somethings today and compares this data to young adults from previous decades. The findings across the decades suggest that twenty-somethings have had and continue to have great respect for places of worship and religious beliefs. However, where twenty-somethings today diverge from their parents and grandparents is their comfort with dissociating from religion entirely. The stigma of not being affiliated has lessened, giving young adults the freedom to pursue their life course without the pressure to align their beliefs with a specific institution. The authors demonstrate the growing need to research today's young adults as a generation that is independent of the generations that came before them.

The third section focuses on Catholicism. Among the most successful young adult programs for Catholic students was "Theology on Tap" which combined a weekly social/drinking hour with a lecture on a faith-based topic. The reason behind this program's popularity lies in the fact that the main motivator for Catholic young adults to invest in the church was community. Spiritual experiences, such as the Eucharist, also ranked high among Catholic young adults. The key to this church's success was its durability. The church described in the study has been willing to adapt and change its programming as needed to cater to the needs of their emerging adults. While these case studies on specific Catholic programs are useful, they capture individual experiences rather than the population as a whole,

which is something to consider when using this data as a tool in a ministry setting.

Section four delineates the different categories of Mainline protestants. While Catholic young adults crave community, the inclusivity of the Mainline Protestant Church draws young adults to join these congregations. Activism and liberalism were central to the identity of the Mainliners captured in the study, yet their affiliation with the church became a pivotal part of their identity as well. In a personal interview with a college Mainliner named Gillian, the researchers discovered that Gillian felt welcomed in the church regardless of whether she attended regularly or not, which is a belief she perceived to be widespread among college students. The implications of this attitude towards attendance are two sided. On one hand, it is favorable that college students like Gillian feel accepted by their church communities regardless of how often they come. However, this passivity towards attendance serves as a barrier to commitment to the church, something that keeps young adults from becoming fully immersed in their church congregations. Mainline Protestants have diminished numerically compared to Evangelical protestants. While many Estranged Mainliners, those that hardly ever or never attend church, hope to rejoin the church after having children, this percentage does not match the percentage of Mainline Protestants in the church today. This means that unless there is a significant increase in Mainliners fertility rates, it would be expected that many Mainline churches will be closing their doors within the next twenty years.

Section five focuses on two Evangelical Churches that have successfully captured the attention of the young adult community. These churches are Consolidated and New Life Fellowship. Young adults involved in these churches said that it was the teaching and preaching that kept them coming back. This was the largest group captured in the study, and they were also the most religiously passionate. Because evangelicals see salvation as a binary decision, an estranged Evangelical is essentially a non-Evangelical. Evangelicals who felt close to God were more likely to have friends who also attended church and felt close to God, demonstrating the importance of social dynamics in Evangelical church circles.

The final section was on Nones. Nones are young adults who do not fall into any category of Christianity or any organized religion. Though they disaffiliate from religion as an institution, many Nones still identify themselves as being spiritual. They are heavily influenced by their social context, meaning that Nones who had Christian parents or religiously active friends were more likely to profess their belief in God. Nones hold

institutions, including politics, at a distance. Flawed as they may be, social institutions serve a purpose, and Nones are faced with addressing these needs on their own.

The data presented make a clear case that affiliation with religion was important and widespread among American twenty-somethings. The primary consensus is that twenty-somethings typically “fish or cut bait” when it comes to religion; however, it is evident that young adults care deeply about their religious lives even if the decision to invest in a local church body is prolonged due to other life factors. They might be leery of the church and more apprehensive to commit, but they are not necessarily leaving altogether.

Although it is impossible for one book to answer the question “where have all the twenty-somethings gone,” the authors provide a robust amount of data that give insight into today’s twenty-somethings. This book provides the reader with the language to identify the spiritual needs of today’s twenty-somethings as well as the insight to understand how the church might be falling short of fulfilling these needs. The book is compelling and the results, though striking and seemingly antithetical to the question posed at the beginning, demonstrate that perhaps today’s young adults are not entirely absent from religious institutions but rather have a complex set of needs that the church must be cognizant of. Foley and Clydesdale synthesize the past, highlight the present, and attempt to use this data to forecast the future of young adult ministry in the church. It is a book worthy of reading not for the sake of having the answer to the question of where the twenty-somethings have gone, but for the sake of having a deeper understanding of what makes today’s twenty-something souls unique.

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