SOULS IN TRANSITION

The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults

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Introduction

WHAT HAPPENS in the religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers when they start to grow up, end high school, and begin to leave home to launch their own new adult lives? What do the religious and spiritual lives of American 18- to 23-year-olds look like and why? What are the social influences that shape people's lives of during this phase? And how do people change or not change religiously and spiritually as they exit their teenage years and head into their twenties? These are the questions this book seeks to answer.

TRACKING TEENAGERS AS THEY BECOME EMERGING ADULTS

In this book, we[1] analyze and interpret data collected in the third wave of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) in order to better understand the religious and spiritual lives of what we will here call "emerging adults."[2] With our colleagues on the project, we have been studying the sample of young people on whom this study is based since they were 13–17 years old, when the survey started out—with a nationally representative telephone survey of 3,290 of them followed by personal interviews with 267 of them in 45 states around the country.[3] *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* was published in 2005, based on what was learned from that first wave of data collected.[4] In 2005, a second telephone survey was conducted with most of the same subjects, and 122 of the same respondents were reinterviewed.[5] Throughout these years, the researchers continued to systematically stay in touch with and track as many of the study respondents as was humanly

possible, and in 2007 and 2008 a third wave of survey (N = 2,458) and interviews (N = 230) data collection was conducted with them.[6] The respondents in this third wave were 18 to 23 years old. They had passed beyond the high school era and were entering into emerging adulthood. This book examines them at the third measured point of their ongoing life trajectories, which makes it possible to study them at that moment but also to look backward and see how their life conditions in previous years have shaped their current lives as emerging adults. They have transitioned to a new phase of life, are striking out on their own, and are encountering many new challenges and experiences. The research seeks to discover what happens, in the midst of those transitions, to their religious faith, practices, beliefs, associations, and commitments. How much do they change and why? Answering such questions well is the central purpose of this book.[7]

Better understanding the religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults will yield many valuable things. It will first of all improve general knowledge about the fairly recently developed stage of the life course called "emerging adulthood." What is it like to be an 18- to 29-year-old in America? What are the major strengths and problems of emerging adults today? How are they faring in their journey to full adulthood? Understanding the religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults better will also provide important insight into the nature of basic life course changes, both religious and otherwise, as youth transition out of their teenage years into adulthood.[8] What does it mean to shift from one life phase to the other? How are people changed by undergoing that process? What implications does that transition have for the different way people's lives turn out? How do different features of American culture and society facilitate or complicate the transition to adulthood?[9] Furthermore, the present study promises to broaden and deepen understanding of American religion itself. How important is religion for young people today? Are there generational changes afoot that seem to be strengthening or weakening religious faith and practice in the United States? What factors present in people's lives at younger ages appear to form religious and spiritual outcomes later in life? Why and how do some young people abandon or grow in their faith, or perhaps convert to new religions? What are the major social and cultural forces influencing the contours and texture of American religion today? Finally, this study provides what we hope will be an illuminating window on the character of contemporary American culture and institutions broadly. One of the best ways to understand the nature and quality of any society, we believe, is to look closely at how it views and treats its youth. Studying the lives of young people in social context is a great way to enrich adults' perspective on their own adult society and lives. By examining the world of contemporary emerging adults, we think we hold up a mirror that reflects back to adults a telling picture of the larger adult world—their own world—into which emerging adults are moving.[10]

ON "EMERGING ADULTHOOD"

We said earlier that we will in this book be calling the young people this study examines "emerging adults," and we want to explain here why.[11] In the last

several decades, a number of macro social changes have combined to create a new phase in the American life course. Four have been particularly important. First is the dramatic growth of higher education. The GI Bill, changes in the American economy, and government subsidizing of community colleges and state universities led, in the second half of the last century, to a dramatic rise in the number of high school graduates going on to college and university. More recently, many feel pressured—in pursuit of the American dream—to add years of graduate school education on top of their bachelor's degrees. As a result, a huge proportion of American youth are no longer stopping school and beginning stable careers at age 18 but are extend their formal schooling well into their twenties. And those who are aiming to join America's professional and knowledge classes—those who most powerfully shape our culture and society—are continuing in graduate and professional school programs often up until their thirties. A second and related social change crucial to the rise of emerging adulthood is the delay of marriage by American youth over the last decades. Between 1950 and 2006, the median age of first marriage for women rose from 20.3 to 25.9. For men during that same time the media age rose from 22.8 to 27.5. The sharpest increase for both took place after 1970.[12] Half a century ago, many young people were anxious to get out of high school, marry, settle down, have children, and start a long-term career. But many youth today face almost a decade between high school graduation and marriage to spend exploring life's many options as singles, in unprecedented freedom.[13]

A third major social transformation contributing to the rise of emerging adulthood as a distinct life phase concerns changes in the American and global economy that undermine stable, lifelong careers and replace them instead with careers with lower security, more frequent job changes, and an ongoing need for new training and education. Most young people today know they need to approach their careers with a variety of skills, maximal flexibility, and readiness to retool as needed. That itself pushes youth toward extended schooling, delay of marriage, and, arguably, a general psychological orientation of maximizing options and postponing commitments. Far from being happy to graduate from high school and take the factory job their father or uncle has arranged for them—a job that actually does not likely exist anymore—many youth today spend 5 to 10 years experimenting with different job and career options before finally deciding on a long-term career direction. Fourth, and partly as a response to all of the foregoing, parents of today's youth, aware of the resources it often takes to succeed, seem increasingly willing to extend financial and other support to their children, well into their twenties and perhaps early thirties. According to best estimates, American parents spend on their children an average of $38,340 per child in total material assistance (cash, housing, educational expenses, food, etc.) over the 17-year period between ages 18 and 34.[14] These resources help to subsidize the freedom that emerging adults enjoy to take a good, long time before settling down into full adulthood, culturally defined as the end of schooling, a stable career job, financial independence, and new family formation.

These four social transformations together have helped dramatically to alter the experience of American life between the ages of 18 and 30. Studies agree that the transition to adulthood today is more complex, disjointed, and confusing than in past decades. 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. At the same time, these years are marked by a historically unparalleled freedom to roam, experiment, learn, move on, and try again. What has emerged from this new situation has been variously labeled "extended adolescence," "youthhood," "adultolescence," "the twixter years," "young adulthood," the "twenty-somethings," and "emerging adulthood." We find persuasive the psychologist Jeffrey Arnett's argument that of all of these labels, "emerging adulthood" is the most appropriate.[15] That is because, rather than viewing these years as simply the last hurrah of adolescence or an early stage of real adulthood, it recognizes the very unique characteristics of this new and particular phase of life. The features marking this stage are intense identity exploration, instability, a focus on self, feeling in limbo or in transition or in between, and a sense of possibilities, opportunities, and unparalleled hope. These, of course, are also often accompanied—as we will show—by large doses of transience, confusion, anxiety, self-obsession, melodrama, conflict, disappointment, and sometimes emotional devastation. Many popular television shows of the last few decades—*Beverly Hills 90210*, *Dawson's Creek*, *Seinfeld*, and *Friends*—reflect through Hollywood's lens the character and challenges of this recently developing, in-between stage of life. We think it all signifies something big and serious.

To grasp the significance of emerging adulthood, it is necessary to realize that life stages are not naturally given as immutable phases of existence. Rather, they are cultural constructions that interact with biology and material production, and are profoundly shaped by the social and institutional conditions that generate and sustain them. So "teenager" and "adolescence" as representing a distinct stage of life were very much twentieth-century inventions, brought into being by changes in mass education, child labor laws, urbanization and suburbanization, mass consumerism, and the media. Similarly, a new, distinct, and important stage in life, emerging adulthood, situated between the teenage years and full-fledged adulthood, has emerged in American culture in recent decades—reshaping the meaning of self, youth, relationships, and life commitments as well as a variety of behaviors and dispositions among the young. As a result, life for many today between ages 18 and 30 years old, roughly, has morphed into a different experience from that of previous generations. The purpose of this book is to investigate what happens, as youth enter and begin to move through emerging adulthood, to their religious and spiritual lives in particular.

A related note on terminology. In the scholarly literature, "emerging adulthood" refers to 18- to 29-year-olds. The sample of Americans this book investigates and reports on, however, represents only the first half of emerging adulthood, ages 18 to 23. As a consequence, this book's cases, findings, and interpretations do not actually speak for or about all emerging adults in the

United States today but rather those emerging adults in the beginning portion of this stage. However, rather than consistently recognizing this qualification by adding another adjective to the front of every mention of emerging adult—such as "*new* emerging adult," with perhaps the clumsy acronym NEA for short—we will instead simply use the term "emerging adult." Readers should keep in mind throughout, however, that this is shorthand for convenience's sake to represent only the first half of emerging adulthood. Americans 24 to 29 years old may prove to look and sound quite different, though only more research will tell.[16]

WHAT FOLLOWS

The story of American emerging adult religion and spirituality unfolds in the following chapters in a particular sequence that moves from the very specific to the more general and then back to the more specific. The chapters also move back and forth between a primary reliance on qualitative interview data and on quantitative survey evidence. Chapter 1 begins with very specific instances, telling the stories of three particular case studies, drawn from interviews, of individual emerging adults whose experiences illustrate some of this book's major themes. These case studies are not in some way meant to be representative of all emerging adults in the United States. That would be impossible to do with a limited number of cases. Rather, these stories are meant simply to begin to convey some of the character of emerging adult life, to demonstrate the range of possible emerging adult experiences concerning religious and spiritual matters particularly, and to sketch out some concrete cases that will furnish specific examples to illustrate concepts discussed later.

Chapter 2 describes the main contours of contemporary emerging adult culture in the United States, in order to establish a broader context for this book's central focus on religion and spirituality. Drawing on personal interview data, we paint with a broad brush on a large canvas the most prominent cultural themes and features that characterize the assumptions, outlooks, experiences, beliefs, and goals of the majority of American emerging adults. Throughout this chapter, we highlight some varying alternative counterperspectives that some smaller groups of emerging adults expressed in interviews. Having thus described significant elements of mainstream and countervailing emerging adult culture, we then examine some of the more important possible implications of the prominent cultural themes and features we have identified for explaining emerging adults' religious and spiritual lives in particular.

Chapter 3 steps back to examine—with the help of data from the General Social Survey (GSS), one of the best national surveys of residents in the United States—the religiousness of contemporary emerging adults in both historical and life course perspective. Most of this book focuses on what can be known about 18- to 23-year-olds in the United States today. But we will be able to make much better sense in that examination if we begin by providing a sense early on of how contemporary emerging adults compare both to older adults today and to their young adult counterparts in prior decades. Answering those

questions will provide a helpful perspective on the larger question we pursue in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 4 delves into findings from the NSYR survey data in much greater depth. This is the chapter that contains the most nationally representative data on emerging adult religion. Our purpose here is to map out the terrain of the religious and spiritual lives of contemporary emerging adults at a big-picture level. This chapter contains many statistics—mostly percentage differences across groups. However, the numbers are well worth studying in order to understand how religious they are and the ways that has changed—or not—since they were teenagers.

Having explored a mass of statistical evidence concerning emerging adults' religious and spiritual lives, we return in chapter 5 to analyzing NSYR interview data in order to identify key themes in American emerging adult religious culture. What are the cultural assumptions, beliefs, expectations, and concerns of emerging adults when it comes to religious faith and practice? In this chapter, we elaborate and illustrate a number of illuminating emerging adult cultural structures concerning religion and spirituality that help to explain the character and bearings of emerging adults' religious and spiritual lives.

Chapter 6 lays out a typology of emerging adult religious approaches into which most American emerging adults seem to fit. Typologies always oversimplify, but they can also help to bring useful clarity to masses of data. Our purpose in this chapter is to identify a limited number of religious types—defined by their religious commitment, knowledge, consistency, and interests—that describe well certain key underlying commonalities shared by different religious sets of emerging adults today. The religious and cultural themes described in chapters 2 and 5 will explain, in part, the features of these types. The typology itself should help to illuminate the multidimensional complexity of religious life among contemporary emerging adults.

Chapter 7 returns to many of the case studies originally presented in *Soul Searching* to see where their subjects' lives have taken them over the subsequent five years. Following these developments reveals yet another aspect of the shape and dynamics of the religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults in the United States.

Chapter 8 takes the analysis to a new level, exploring in greater depth a variety of factors that were measured when the survey's respondents were 13 to 17 years old that appear to influence religion and spirituality during the emerging adult years. Which among a host of possible factors appear to shape how religious emerging adults are five years later? The more complicated statistical techniques of multivariate regression and qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) are employed to ferret out the answers.

Chapter 9 explores possible differences in the life outcomes of emerging adults that appear to result from their different religious backgrounds, beliefs, commitments, and practices. Various studies of different populations have found that religion often makes a significant difference in a variety of life outcomes, from happiness to risk behaviors to mortality. *Soul Searching* found the same kinds of differences among 13- to 17-year-olds. Do these differences

continue to hold up among 18- to 23-year-olds? Or do the religion-outcomes connections begin to break down during emerging adulthood? Chapter 9 sets out to answer those questions.

Chapter 10 is a step back and an attempt to make sense of all of the findings of the prior chapters. What, this chapter asks, has been revealed? What does it all mean? What do the implications seem to be? While this chapter is a conclusion to the book, it is also more than that: an attempt to interpret all of the pieces in terms of a larger, coherent framework that summarizes what the book has shown and makes clear its meaning and significance.

As a whole, this book offers readers a large quantity of statistical data and life narratives, as well as analysis, interpretation, and explanation of that evidence. To assimilate and make sense of it all may require some digesting and reflection. Overall, this book intends to provide the most comprehensive and reliable understanding and explanation of the lives of emerging adults in the United States today, particularly their religious and spiritual lives.

1

Brad, June, and Amanda

THIS CHAPTER OPENS UP our investigation of the religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults by telling the stories of three very different young people who were interviewed for this research project in the summer of 2008. Our purpose is to begin to convey some of the character of emerging adult life and culture generally, as well as some of the variety in emerging adults' religious and spiritual lives specifically. The three cases whose stories we narrate in this chapter will also serve as illustrative references for numerous more general points and themes that we develop throughout this book. Emerging adult life is of course far too varied and complicated—by race, sex, religion, social class, educational experience, family background, approaches to risk behaviors, and many other features—to be represented in a mere three case studies. The lives of Brad, June, and Amanda as we recount them here are not meant to be comprehensively typical of their generation or age cohort in any way. No three specific cases could ever be that. We have chosen them rather as real-life cases—to help open up this book by conveying some of the range and character of emerging adult life experiences, religious orientations, and cultural outlooks. Later chapters will introduce still other cases of other emerging adults to fill in some of the gaps in representative types left by this chapter. For now it will be enough to get to know three particular emerging adults whose lives reveal some things, but not everything, about who emerging adults are, how different their lives can be, what social forces influence their experiences, and how they think and talk about religion and spirituality.

BRAD

I meet Brad for breakfast at a Denny's on a Saturday morning not far from his house in a middle-class suburb of a Rocky Mountain state capital city. Brad shows up early, nicely dressed, clean cut, and cordial. A young man of 21—with dark features, fashionable glasses, and a businesslike demeanor that stands out against his somewhat still-boyish-looking face—Brad describes his history and life with an economy of words. He graduated from the local high school three years earlier, worked his way up from the mail-room to become a sales agent at an area branch of a national agricultural and construction machinery company, is taking online classes in business management part-time through an Internet-based university, and is in the throes of making last-minute arrangements with Amy, his fiancée, for their wedding, which is to be held in three weeks. Brad met Amy in high school, dated her for the last five years, and lived with her for the last two years, first in a rented apartment and then in a house he purchased. The time has arrived in their relationship, he explains, to "make it official." Both Brad's and Amy's parents live in the same suburb as they do, and everyone is happy about their relationship and impending marriage. Brad's parents both work clerical jobs in corporations. Brad has labored hard since middle school—first in his own lawn mowing company, then as a busboy in restaurants, and now in his "real" sales job—to save money for his own financial needs. In high school he bought his own car. Recently he bought the modest house in which he and Amy are living. Brad strikes me as responsible, very much in charge of his own life, not too dependent on or beholden to anyone else for anything. He says he gets along fine with his parents but is not too close to them. He has a lot of friends but feels no pressure to do anything with them that does not interest him. He reports rarely feeling sad or depressed. "I don't really talk to a lot of people about anything," he says. "I kind of like to do things on my own, feel I have made the right decisions on my own. I feel better and safer coming to conclusions on my own as opposed to asking other people's opinions."

Brad says that he liked high school and was not rebellious as a teenager; "Nothing major. I mean, there's always stuff that every teenager does, you know, staying out too late, sneaking around, getting your first car, like that, but I never really got into trouble for anything big." He did drink a lot of alcohol, but that never proved to be a problem, he says. Before meeting Amy, he dated one other girl in high school, for eight months, with whom he had sex for the first time. "I guess it just sort of happened. It worked out. Nothing bad ever happened." Brad has also "hooked up" with at least one other girl, although he did not elaborate on what exactly that meant and did not seem to want to discuss it. After graduating from high school, Brad lived with friends in a shared apartment. They drank a lot of alcohol together, which he says was fun. But after six months, he and Amy decided to move in together, so they got their own apartment. Now he is transitioning to a fully responsible adult lifestyle and is quite pleased with himself and his life.

As to religion, Brad definitely considers himself a Christian, just like his parents. He and his family together attend a very large, evangelical, somewhat seeker-oriented Bible church in the area that has quasi-denominational ties to its mother church in Southern California. I am surprised to learn that he attends an evangelical church, as he has been living with his girlfriend for two years, and most such churches condemn sex before marriage. Although he attends church somewhat regularly, overall, he seems fairly neutral and ho-hum about religion. Speaking of himself and his parents, he observes, "We're not strong, firm believers—we have the same religious ideas and concepts but we don't go to church every weekend, there will be times when it's weekly and then other times where we don't go for months. It's hit and miss, here and there. We don't go for the sort of hardcore Christian type." Brad has nothing in particular against his own church, other than his feeling that it is too large for his taste. "I enjoy a good sermon, a good speaker, I enjoy drinking the coffee," he says, chuckling. So why doesn't he attend more often?

> Kind of how busy the schedule is, depends on our lifestyles. We do lots of camping and stuff with Amy's family, go to the zoo, to the cabin, stuff life that. And working Monday through Friday, solid days, it's kind of our weekends to do our stuff. But if we get a free Sunday, we'll go with our parents or go ourselves once in a while.

Brad's parents used to attend church more frequently, he reports, but decreased their attendance when his mother started working a paid job five years earlier. Amy is also a nondenominational evangelical Christian, like Brad, although he doesn't know much about her religiously beyond that. Still, he notes, going to church "makes Amy happy, she's more inclined to go [than I am]. I think she likes the idea of us going." So he is amenable to attending church when they can.

Brad reports that overall he has gotten less religious in recent years. He was involved in his church's youth group during middle school—he especially enjoyed the bowling, he recalls—and used to attend church weekly. "I still have the same *ideas* now, I just don't go to church like I used to do every Sunday. Everyone's kind of got busier lifestyles, maybe higher priorities." He does not pray very often and does not read the Bible, though he makes a point of saying that he owns one. He also does not put money into the church offering plate and reports not really feeling much sense of belonging in his church. Family and friends are much more important in that way. At the same time, he says he suffers from no religious doubts, has absolutely no interest in any other religions, and thinks he will always remain a Christian.

So what does Brad actually believe religiously? "Go to heaven," he replies, "I believe that. I believe in the Rapture. I'm not sure what else. I believe there is a God and if we're saved by him, that sort of stuff." Seeming dissatisfied with his answer, he quickly adds:

> I mean I have my beliefs in my head. But I don't enjoy the whole religious scene. I'm not really into it like some people are. I have my

beliefs, I believe that's the way it is, and the way it should be, and I go to church every once in a while. But it's kind of low-key.

I questioned Brad about salvation and heaven and hell, in which he says he believes. "If you believe in Jesus and ask him to be in your life, it's a belief thing," he answers. So why, I continue, would anyone need to be saved or maybe would end up in hell? "Well, if they don't believe those things, believe that Jesus is real or—I don't know how to describe it, kind of if you're a bad person or committed sins that can't be forgiven, stuff like that, then you go to hell." What if someone is a good, nice person but has never heard of Jesus? I inquire. They go to heaven, Brad thinks, though he's not sure. Doesn't Brad's church teach against sex before marriage and cohabitation? I probe. "Yeah, I think they do, right. But I think it's all based on your situation, if that's what you want to believe at that kind of church, sure, that's great, if that's what they want to do. It's all relative." So then he believes sex before marriage is not wrong for Christians? "I think it's kind of, I don't really think that idea [no sex before marriage] is part of this time, this age." Brad and Amy are not getting married in church but in an outdoor public park in the city.

Behind many of Brad's answers is the apparent view that an individual's choice of beliefs—influenced by his or her family socialization, of course—is mostly what makes those beliefs true, at least for that person. When talking about the possible validity of non-Christian religions, for example, Brad says, "I think my beliefs, my religion is the right religion. If others believe different, then that's fine, I don't really know for sure, I just think that's what I believe. I don't know why or what, that's what I was raised to think and that's what comes to mind as what's right, so that's what's right." And when discussing what different people do and do not get out of church, Brad concludes, "I think in my head it's all personal opinion, whether you're going to believe it or choose to like it and listen or not." At the same time, and perhaps partly as a result, Brad seems somewhat lost on larger questions about morality. He says he believes in objective moral right and wrong, reporting: "I think I always do the right thing. I have never had any issues." But he's also not sure what morality itself is based on. "I'm sure it has to do with religion, maybe that plays a role in it. I don't know if I could go so far as to say it's a God thing, I don't know, I'm not sure what really decides that." At times, Brad says that morality is about "kind of everyone's perception of right and wrong, a group consensus or idea, kind of just a majority." At other times Brad emphasizes subjective moral intuitions. "I think everyone knows, for the most part, has a sense of right and wrong, and it's just part of who you are, feeling that something is wrong." When talking about how he would decide what to do in a morally ambiguous situation, Brad reports, "I'm leaning toward taking care of number one, what would make me happy, help me get ahead. You've got to do what's right for you. I'm always for myself, on a larger scale I'm always worried about myself first, I kind of need to go off my own ideas." What, I query, about the role of God or the Bible? "I think I always kind of lean toward the Bible, what God says is right, but I don't really rely on it." At

bottom, Brad seems to summarize his situation by confessing, "I would say I'm kind of confused on the question, I guess. I think there is a straight path and objective right but I'm not sure what it is, where it comes from."

Socially and politically, Brad thinks he is probably a conservative. For him that means: "I kind of like things the way they've always been and keeping things natural, kind of the good old way it used to be." He values America's freedoms and rights. In our discussions, he strongly emphasizes individual choice and responsibility. He says he looks down on "crazy, drugged low-lifes, as I call them." Alcoholics and drug users have no one to blame for their irresponsible decisions but themselves. By contrast, Brad likes "outgoing, responsible, smart, family-oriented types of people." Brad believes in the death penalty and is antiabortion and firmly against gay marriage. "That's wrong, not the way God intended it to be. The Bible says it's a sin." Brad is also unhappy about illegal immigration and health-care rights for undocumented aliens. At the same time, Brad is not particularly interested in politics or global issues: "I'd say I watch the stock market more than I do world events." He does not expect to vote in the next election because none of the candidates appeal to him. Brad believes volunteer work is good to do, at least in theory, but he does not volunteer because he has "higher priorities" now. He advocates fiscal responsibility and is against people going into debt to buy consumer items. But he also believes in the absolute right to private property and freedom of consumer choice. "If people can afford whatever, fine. If they progress that far, they can have it, they can go buy eight boats if they want, if they can afford it."

What does Brad look for in life in the years to come? "I'd like to be successful, well-off, provide for my family. Along the way maybe travel a bit, play golf, go camping, visit places, stay at home, hang out with family, go to the park, stuff like that." What kind of material lifestyle would Brad like to have? "Materially, a nice house, reliable vehicles, nice cars to rely on to get you places, and maybe recreational activities on the weekends or whatever, a four-wheeler or something like that." Brad wants to have two children and expects that Amy will stay at home with them as a full-time mother after the first is born. Finally, what does Brad imagine he will be like religiously when he is 30 years old? "I don't know, it's hard to tell," he says. "I can only say the same as I am right now. With kids, probably we'll go to Sunday school."

I leave the interview with a lot of questions. What actually does it mean to "believe in Jesus and ask him to be in your life" in Brad's kind of faith? Why is Brad so sure that gay marriage is morally, even biblically wrong when he is so ready to disregard traditional church teachings against premarital heterosexual sex and living for "number one?" Does the leadership of Brad's evangelical church realize how relatively uncommitted and indifferent he is when it comes to his religious faith and practice? Is American Christianity really about personally enjoying sermons on occasion, "going to heaven," and meanwhile enjoying private family and recreational worlds of financial comfort and mass consumption while disregarding the common good, public life, and one's needy neighbors? Left with many more questions than answers,

I pack up my stuff and head on to the next interview, in the hope that in due time the research will begin to reveal some big-picture insights.

JUNE

I meet June for lunch at a Mexican restaurant in the modest-sized southern Appalachian mountain town in which she lives. I originally proposed to June that we meet for our interview at the Bob Evans restaurant in the same shopping center, but June said no because her ex-husband works there. She recommended the Mexican restaurant instead. June shows up late. But that gives me plenty of time to find a quiet, out-of-the-way table at which to conduct our interview and to get my recording equipment and paperwork ready. When June arrives, all of the restaurant staff recognizes her with "Hola! ¿Que Pasa?" Nobody in NSYR has ever interviewed June before—this is her first interview with our project. I have chosen to meet her because in her survey she has identified herself as a "Satanist." June turns out to be a friendly 19-year-old with plain features who is wearing a somewhat low-cut blouse and very short shorts. It also seems to me that she has, after the initial smiles are over, a somewhat sad disposition. We order our meals and start in on chips and salsa. The television in the far corner is playing the quarter-final European Cup match between Spain and Italy, totally engrossing the waiters, who are happy to leave us alone for the three hours of our interview.

There prove to be good reasons for June to seem sad. Not yet even into her twenties, June not only is already divorced but was badly physically abused by her ex-husband. Their divorce is recent. She is also the mother of a toddler son, Ben, who has been removed from her through court order by the state's child protection services. Ben is living with a temporary foster family somewhere else in the state, and June sees him only one hour a week. June is also unemployed, in trouble over past drug abuse, and only recently a fully recovered drug addict. It turns out that June's entire life these days—her nearly every thought and action—revolves around getting her son, Ben, back. That is why she has quit drugs—she failed an early drug test, and the state told her she would never get her son back if she did not clean up. That is also why she has divorced her husband—the state made her divorcing him a condition of the possibility of her gaining custody of Ben again. Even so, it turns out, June has still not entirely learned to make all of the right choices needed to get Ben back.

June describes life in her town as "pretty boring, not a lot to do at all. The biggest thing when I was younger was to go out and party. That was the big thing around here, to go out drinking, just out in the middle of nowhere, building a fire, going fishing, drinking." Partying also seems to involve risky sex:

> There's a lot of people having babies, and there's not a lot of jobs around. If you don't go to school for something, you're not going to get anything over minimum wage around here. Everybody's having babies. All kinds of teenagers, all of my friends, and a bunch of kids younger

> than me. Everybody's getting pregnant at 16 or 17. I was one of them, I can't lie. I was one of them too.

June got pregnant at age 17, before she was married. She was taking the Pill for birth control, but it did not work. She says she thinks a lot of girls in her area get pregnant "just to trap the guys they're with. I know a couple guys that the girls told them they were on birth control, and they supposedly weren't, and they got pregnant, and the guys felt obligated to stay with them." Drugs are another issue:

> Drugs. There's a lot of drugs around here. There's a lot of meth [methamphetamines], and that's just a terrible drug. I've lost so many addicted friends because they just turn into liars. They don't care what they steal. They'll come to your house and steal your light bulbs. They don't care. They'll come steal all your tools, your stereo out of your car just 'cause they know it's in there, bust your windshield out and steal your stereo. They'll steal your whole car. I mean, that's a bad drug.

A lot of people in June's community also suffer from diseases, she says. She says that in a larger city not too far away, "there's big chemical plants down there and sometimes that has a lot to do with it because, I don't know if you saw the stuff rolling out of the big towers down there, but I'm sure that that's not good for anyone. There was this mysterious blue haze one night, on the day of my grandpa's funeral, actually, and they talked about it all over the news, and it was a blue haze, and they thought it was from one of the chemical plants or some ridiculous thing."

Life was more fun and innocent when June was younger. She played volleyball and softball in middle school. She and her mother used to show horses competitively. And they sometimes traveled to Disneyland and various amusement parks, where they both enjoyed riding roller coasters. Then everything changed. "On my first day of seventh grade, my mom had a stroke due to a brain aneurism. I was 12." June's mother barely escaped death, suffered brain damage, and has been in poor health since, enduring regular dizzy and fainting spells. Since the stroke, June says she has been an occasional caregiver to her mother, and more recently to some extent for her grandmother as well, with whom they live. That responsibility is partly because her parents (and grandparents) divorced when she was very young and her father now lives in Texas. Until recently she had no relationship with him at all. "I never had talked to my father till the night I delivered my baby." The sibling relations are also a bit complicated: "I have an older and a younger half-sister, an older step-sister, and a younger half-brother"—all but one now live in Texas, and the one nearby is checked out. June explains:

> I feel like I should stay for my mom and my grandma because my mom's just been getting sicker and sicker. My cousins, they all left for the military, so they're in Iraq, and my sister, she moved in with her husband, and she's going to school full-time, working full-time, and they never see her. When I stay there with my mom, I try to help her

out. I go to the grocery store for her and my grandma. I take their trash out.

But June and her mother do not get on well. "She drives me crazy, all the time, accusing me of doing stuff that I'm not doing. She is always set on drama. My family is crazy. There's a lot of tension between us. She'll slam a door when she walks out, give me evil looks, just make these frustrated noises." June's mother has recently announced that if June does not get Ben back, then she will have to leave the house and live on her own. "She pretty much just told me if I don't get him back, then I have to get out. I'm not allowed to live there anymore." June's mother does help her with the complicated medical and legal chores of the process of resecuring custody of Ben, but they still do not get along. "I don't feel very close with her. I feel a lot closer to my dad now, and he's thousands of miles away. I can be completely honest with my dad on the phone now when we talk, but I can't be honest with my mom because she's very judgmental."

June recounts that she first smoked marijuana at age 11, when she came across it in her 21-year-old sister's bedroom. "I found it in her room, and I was like, hmm, I'm going to try this out." From then on, she smoked irregularly until age 14, at which point smoking weed became a routine. June paid for her pot by "bumming money at school, like, 'Can I have 50 cents? Can I get a dollar?' " Her uncle—her mother's brother—was her supplier. So why did June smoke? "Self-medication. Stress, anxiety. I have a lot of social anxiety, and depression. I used to have depression anyway. [I see now that] I never really knew depression till I lost my son, but *now* I know depression." June started smoking cigarettes when she was 13 or 14. "I was stupid. I don't know, at the time, I had a boyfriend who was 19. I got kicked out of my mom's house for a month, 'cause she was acting crazy, and we got a pack of cigarettes. I decided I was just going to smoke one of those cigarettes, and I got real bad nicotine buzz off of it." At age 19, June smokes a pack a day. She had it down to three cigarettes a day after Ben was born, but when he was taken away she started back up again, smoking a lot.

June drank her first alcohol at age 12, when the same sister gave her a mixed drink. "She told me that she would rather me drink with her than go out and do it with my friends, 'cause she saw where I was going with my friends anyhow. She knew I was turning rebellious." June started drinking heavily at age 16 or 17. "Then I went on a couple three-month binges, I was just drunk constantly. It was pretty stupid. That's when I met my ex-husband, was during the three month binge, and that's when I got pregnant, I was drunk at the time." It took a long time for June to realize that she was pregnant, she says, because when she would wake up with morning sickness she assumed that she was merely hungover from drinking. Only after missing her period for a couple of months did she start to suspect she was pregnant. Then she quit drinking. But on the day Ben was taken away, June got drunk again. Since then she has drunk excessively about 10 times, she guesses, both to have fun and to drown her sorrows. "But drinking doesn't fix your problems at all,"

June observes, "not for me. It makes it much worse. I get very emotional when I drink, so I tend to stay away from alcohol. Plus, it kills my stomach."

What about harder drugs, I inquired? "Where do you want me to start?" she asks. "I've tried coke, morphine, heroin, Lortem, Xanax, Klonopin, crack, meth. When I was 15 I did it for the first time. When I was 16, I did meth for a couple months, and then I never have done it again since." She stopped, she says, because she visited a lab where methamphetamine was made, and it revolted her. "I saw what they were putting into it, how they were making it, and I was like, oh, my God, I've been doing this for the last two months, how am I not dead? It turned my stomach enough to just be like, I'm going to go to jail or die." So why did June ever do hard drugs? "'cause I like the feeling, I mean I like getting messed up." Becoming a mother, however, altered her view:

> When I had my kid that changed the way I looked at things, changed everything. It wasn't about me any more. I couldn't be selfish, it's about my son. Since then I didn't do hard drugs. I would smoke pot, you know, every once in a while, but that's not really that hard of a drug—that doesn't comatose you so you lay there and can't move or function, like other drugs.

Does she ever worry about returning to drugs? "I feel pretty vulnerable with things like that now because it would be easy for me to go and just do some kind of drug, just try to make myself not hurt. But I'm not going to put myself in that situation." Thinking of Ben helps June resist her temptations to go back to drugs. "The thought's crossed my mind, but once it goes through my mind, it's gone, because he's my son. I made him inside my body, nobody else did it, that's mine, and I will get what's mine. I'm very determined about that."

June dropped out of high school in tenth grade—"That happens a lot around here, we have a very high rate of dropouts"—but later regretted not finishing school. Recently she earned her GED. In fact, she scored so high on her GED exams that she won a $3,000 scholarship to any college or school of her choice. She pulled her official scores out of her purse and showed me—indeed, she made the ninetieth-level percentiles on all subjects but math. But, as far as going to school, it is clear that June cannot focus on anything now except getting Ben back. Almost everything else seems to have been put on hold. For a while recently, June worked in the drive-through at Dairy Queen, but she left because her ex-husband's girlfriend was working there. "I just can't stand being around her. I was just like, I can't do this." The little money she makes now she earns from driving friends to destinations to which they need rides. "I haven't really looked for a job. I just give my friends rides and they give me money to give them a ride five miles, and I'm okay." As for possible future work, June says some of the best jobs in the area are in nursing, but she does not want to become a nurse. "I just can't stand nursing homes," she says. "I can't deal with sick people. It breaks my heart."

What a life, I keep thinking to myself. The more June tells of her story, the more world-weary I realize she looks. Later in my notes I will write that in her appearance she seemed "tired, depressed, used."

June, it turns out, was raised with extremely little religion in her life. She identifies herself as not religious, "because I don't know a lot about religion, so if you don't know something, then you can't really declare yourself in that category." June thinks she does believe in some kind of "higher being," but says, however, "That's just a comfort zone, I'd like to believe that. It's a security blanket for me." June prays, but mostly to ask whoever—she doesn't know—to give her Ben back. "I would do anything. Like, I've even bought this necklace from a witchcraft store in town, a 'When-in-Court Necklace,' I'd even be willing to do that. I will try anything at this point, I'm desperate."

I ask June about her mother's religion. She replies, "I don't really know, she confuses me. One day it'll be God, and the next day it'll be aliens or something. She's just being crazy." June's mother does not go to church. June thinks she has read the Bible some, but she does not know if she ever prays. June knows nothing about her father religiously, other than that once recently he said that he believes in God. June was taken to church only twice in her life, by her grandmother when she was a little girl. She does not know of any religious youth groups that were in her high school, although she suspects that there must be some religious groups around that she could be part of if she were interested. She also does not really know any people who are religious—nearly all of her friends are nonreligious. She does know people who claim that their house is haunted with ghosts, but she herself has never had a religious, supernatural, or paranormal experience. All in all, religion is simply not a part of June's life. So what, generally, does June think about religion? "Who cares, really?" she replies. "Not relevant. I never pay attention to churches really at all." In theory, June professes to be open to giving her life to God, if it would bring Ben back, but she does not know how to do that. "I wouldn't really know who to talk to. Actually, one of my friends, his grandfather is a preacher. That's probably where I would start." I am guessing to myself, though, that that is unlikely to happen.

I ask June about the "Satanist" answer she gave in her survey. It turns out to mean very little. Earlier in the year an "antisocial" friend "who doesn't like to drive" paid June $50 to drive him to a Pagan Maypole ceremony up in the mountains, where a woman friend of his was belly dancing. It was held at night, in the woods of a state forest. I asked what the ceremony was about. "I'm not too sure, it seems like it was a lot about women power, women's self-esteem and stuff, not to take any crap from men. I don't know what pagans believe, I'm not sure if they're like devil worshipers, or the earth worshipers, or what they are. I don't really know." What happened there? "Dancing and a lot of music—there was some singing and drums and stuff. They passed out drums. I was sitting there playing the drums." So who was there? "It was women that ran around the Maypole, mostly all women. There were more people there than I expected, a lot, must be more popular than I realized. Also there were a lot of gay guys, some I knew and some had their fingernails painted, that says gay to me." June recalled, "It was amusing, it kept me interested, kept my attention, which is hard to do. It was fun, I might go again next year, just for the heck of it." After the belly dancing and Maypole activities,

June and her friend left. "There were still people arriving," she remembered. "They had masks and devil horns on their heads and stuff. It was starting to get dark, and I was like, 'Man, I bet the pagans get crazy at night, and I'm glad we're getting out of here.' "

Throughout our conversation, June's cell phone keeps vibrating. She continually glances at it, and then puts it back in her purse. Something is happening with her friends, but she stays focused on our interview.

I change the topic to questions about morality. June assures me, "I think I have a pretty good sense of what's right or wrong. I don't know, probably it's just something inside of me. I think I just picked it up along the way more than anything." Is it easy or hard to know right and wrong in life? "Pretty easy." What are examples of wrong things? "It's wrong to rob people, or damage property, or just be mean to people in general." Okay, then what about *doing* the right thing, not just knowing it—is doing right easy or hard? "It's easy. I don't like to do wrong because I believe in karma." Karma? "I just think if I do wrong, then it's going to come back on me. Something bad's going to happen, whether it'd be I'm driving down the interstate and my car breaks down, or something. I've always believed in karma, because I can remember times when I've done the wrong thing and lots of bad things have happened to me." Where does karma come from? What makes it operate? "There is, I believe, there is a God. Maybe God, I don't really know. I can't really answer any of that because I don't know."

But what, I press, is it that makes anything right or wrong? "I guess it's all in my head, whatever I happen to justify, that makes it right or wrong, I suppose. And probably if it is illegal, probably somewhere along the way that makes it right or wrong too—anything that's illegal is probably wrong. Obviously, it wouldn't be illegal if it wasn't wrong." Is it always morally wrong to break the law, even to drive over the speed limit? "It depends on how you look at it, really. Everything, every situation has its right or wrong, really, every situation is different." So what if somebody else really thought it was just fine to hurt other people, would they be wrong? "No, I would probably think in my head that they were wrong, but I wouldn't voice my opinion because I'm not anyone to be able to judge anyone. I don't really have any say." So why is it a problem to judge others? "I don't know, because I just don't think that's right. I don't think it's anyone's place to judge anyone else." Are there universal rights and wrongs, I ask, or is morality ultimately relative? "I don't know. I'm so confused, I don't know really. I think that religion is probably something to study up on more just because I don't know a whole lot about it. I may just study up on all different religions and see what everyone has to think and maybe come up with one of my own." How, I ask, does June decide about right and wrong when she is unsure? "Probably do what would make me feel happy. Whatever situation I'd be in, whatever decision that would make me happy, that's what I would go for." Do people have a moral responsibility to help others? "Myself, yes, I think so," June says. "Other people may not. It depends on how they feel about it." Why, I press, do you think you are responsible to help others?

"Because I feel like if I'm good to other people and do good things, then good things will come to me." June then confesses that she looks down on "slutty" women, "girls who are all over whatever penis that is around, all over it, trying to make out with everything coming and going, including me. I just cannot stand to be around of those types of girls, they just degrade themselves so much, like strippers."

June has never volunteered or given money away—"People give *me* money now," she jokes—though she thinks giving and volunteering would be good to do because of karma. She is concerned about poverty, the war, government debt, crime, and abortion in the United States. But she also has no interest or concern with politics and has never been politically involved. She does not know enough about political positions or ideology generally to even know where she would stand. What *is* a liberal or a conservative, anyway? She doesn't know. June is definitely antiabortion, though:

> Would it be right for me to kill that guy right there? No. Then I don't believe it's right to kill an infant, even if it's unborn. It's still alive, its heart is beating. That decision was laid out for me, either having a baby or having an abortion, and I thought about it and I was like, "I can't have an abortion." If somebody wants to kill their kid, they can go have that baby and give it to me. I don't care. Somebody else will always take a baby.

I then ask about romantic relationships and sex. Altogether, June has dated eight men, six of whom she has lived with. She started dating guys and having sex with them when she was 13 or 14 years old—she can't remember precisely. Her first boyfriend was six years older than she was. "I met him at the movie video store, we exchanged phone numbers, and it just went from there." Within the year, however, he—"my first love," she calls him—was killed in an automobile accident, which was her first real encounter with death. She says this was very hard on her at the time. Between her first boyfriend and her later marriage, she dated and had sex with numerous other men. She says the men rarely used condoms but she simply was not concerned about sexually transmitted diseases. "Didn't care at the time. I look back and feel real lucky now. I knew the risk. I was just risking it." June says that a lot of people in her area do have sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS, although the way she talks implies that she does not have one.

June first met her ex-husband, Nick, when she was 17, at a Pizza Hut. After running into him at a convenience store a week later, she "hooked up"[1] with him. They continued together after that. Nick gradually moved in with June in her mother's house—"He was already hanging around so much"—which her mother did not like but also did not refuse. In due time, June got pregnant, and she and Nick got married. They moved back and forth regularly between their parents' houses. Then Nick started abusing her. He occasionally smacked her, pulled her hair, or twisted her ear, but mostly he choked her, in front of their child, until she passed out. This happened more than two or three time a week, whenever Nick got mad at June. She left him a number of

times but always returned. "I knew I needed to get away, I knew that. Deep down, I knew that, but I didn't leave."

Then the state agency found out about Nick, through a counselor June saw who reported his abuse to the state, which intervened and took Ben. June filed a restraining order against Nick, forcing him to stay away from her. June had to see a psychiatrist on state orders to determine whether she was fit to be Ben's mother. She started a drug rehab program because she failed a drug test. In the midst of sorting out Ben's legal custody, allegations were raised about child pornography on June's family's computer. June still does not know who made those charges, but she strongly suspects that it was Nick. That sealed Ben's fate for being put into the foster care system. After four months of analyses of the computer hard drive, June says, it was declared clean. In the midst of the drama, it also came out that Nick claimed that as a boy he had been sexually abused by cousins, so he began mandatory preventative sex abuse counseling. Despite all of this, June is not through with Nick:

> At first we didn't talk for a long time, and then we tried getting back together there for a couple weeks, and I realized it wasn't going to work because he already got abusive with me again, and I was like, just forget it, it's not going to work. But now we talk to each other on a regular basis, and we tell each other we love each other, because we do. There will always be feelings. We're going to have to be part of each other's lives, whether we like it or not. I think so anyway.

Since her divorce, June has lived with a guy named Frankie, who she met when she picked him up as a hitchhiker. "I gave him my phone number, and we just started hanging out. I don't know, we really liked each other." She soon moved in with Frankie, a roofer by trade. June's mother said nothing about it. June and Frankie lived together for two months and then, June says, "I just got tired of being around him all the time. Staying in a tight space with someone for long enough, you get annoyed and irritated with each other." She moved out. "We're not technically together, but we have feelings for one another." June and Frankie remain sexually involved, but she explains that they have a pact about nonmonogamy: "We have an agreement. If he does anything with anybody else, he'll tell me. If I do anything with anybody else, I'll tell him. And then we won't do anything with each other." Later June explains that Frankie is actually one of her current best friends, along with Frankie's brother, James, with whom Frankie is "always together, they're pretty much inseparable." She explains:

> A lot of times we just drive around. They drink a lot. But, we like to rent movies, and just go and chill out and watch movies. They like to drink a lot, like I said. I'm their designated driver. I'd rather me be out driving them around, than them hitchhiking or getting hit by a car.

So why, I ask, stepping back, did so many of June's intimate relationships end as they did? Her answer:

> Me being a bitch. I'm a hard person to get along with. I've tried to change, but I'm just very moody. It doesn't take a lot to get on my nerves, and if you get on my nerves, I'm not shy to tell you. Usually I would get sick of the guys and tell them to leave, 'cause they were usually living with me.

June also explains that her troubled marriage has made her cautious about marrying again. "Oh yeah, I don't trust very well. I have issues with trust, I know, I do." She is not sure if she ever wants to marry again. In any case, June reports,

> I definitely am not going to marry somebody without living with them first. It's going to take a good, at least a year of me living with them, not just be dating. You don't know what's going to irritate you the most about them until you live with them for a while. They could be abusive, or an alcoholic and you don't know it. It's going to take a lot for me to marry somebody next time.

I ask: does June have any regrets about her relationships with other men, particularly getting involved with them sexually? "No, I don't have any regrets, because I don't believe that anyone should have any regrets."

Next topic: where or with whom, I ask, does June feel her greatest sense of belonging? "More with rebels than the Christian-y, churchgoing type. I'm more comfortable around the rebels." Why them? "Because I'm smarter than them, and I always like to surround myself with people that I'm smarter than, for some reason. I have more morals, and listen to right and wrong more than they do, and I'm like, 'No, you're not going to do that'—I do help them out, keep them out of jail." I ask her to tell me more. "Well, I look at life as a game too, it's just a big game of chess, and I can sit there and move all the pieces right exactly where I want them. Just keeping people in their place more than anything." June describes herself as "very stubborn," saying, "If I argue about something, I have to have the last word. If somebody tries to walk away from me when they're arguing with me, I try to stop them and get in their way." I ask her to elaborate on the life-as-a-game idea:

> Like I said, I can always get what I want and it's all about what I say to people and how I say it, and I can get what I want from about anyone. I think I manipulate people a lot. But, again that goes with life as being a game. I manipulate a lot of people. It's just a personality thing. I just enjoy it.

At about this place in the interview, a strange twist enters into the conversation. June mentions that she was here in this restaurant the night before, drinking margaritas. Who, I ask, was she with? "My ex-husband and two people he works with," she says matter-of-factly, to my only-somewhat-concealed astonishment. But wasn't that a violation of the restraining order? I ask. Couldn't she lose every chance of getting Ben back if anyone saw them drinking together? "Yes it was a violation," she answers. "But we come in

at separate times, leave at separate times, try to sit back in the corner where nobody will see us, I put my hood on. I sit against the wall, and he's much bigger than me, so he towers over me." So, I realize, that is why the restaurant staff are on friendly terms with June—she's a regular, it seems. I repress my bewilderment about how someone who by every sign is so genuinely obsessed with getting her son back can jeopardize everything by having drinks in public with her ex-husband who not long ago regularly choked her into unconsciousness. Isn't alcohol something she is avoiding these days, I inquire? "I sipped it three times. I don't really drink. I don't know, it messes me up, makes me sick." Wow, I think, I don't know if June is 19 going on 39 or 19 going on 12. Seems like both.

During the last half hour of our interview, I notice that June's body language is becoming increasingly withdrawn, like she is pulling away, almost into a bit of a fetal position. She is also no longer speaking directly to me but instead out into the air of the open room. "My life is going nowhere fast," June says, "I hate my situation in life. I hate it." She says she has been having sleeping troubles. "A lot of times, I sleep all day and stay up all night. I didn't sleep at all last night. I've always had a problem with that. I won't sleep for two days and then I'll sleep for three days in a row. It has nothing to do with drugs, although my mom accuses me of drugs." June thinks the cause of her patchy insomnia is stress. In general, June says, she feels pretty disoriented and lost. "I am very depressed, but I try not to be, because if I walk around moping all the time then it just makes it worse." Does she have any way of dealing with her depression, I ask, any counseling or medications? No, she says,

> I just deal with it day to day. I don't have any suicide or homicidal thoughts. I have something to live for, I have my son. That's all I care about. That's all I want back, and it just depresses me that I'm not with him. But, I will be with him. Still, if I did something stupid like that [suicide or homicide] I'd never be with him.

June reports that her grandfather, with whom she was pretty close, died five months previously. She is sad and confused about that, but says, "I don't think I've ever really dealt with it, really. I think that I'm going to get to it when I can deal with it. I just don't think that right now I can deal with that too on top of everything else." June says her mom is grieved about the death of her father. Does June talk about it with her mom? I ask. "She just says 'I don't want to talk about it,' and she starts crying and stomps off into another room." About her life generally, June says,

> I feel like I've got the short end of the stick. It's just there. That's just how it is. That's the way I look at it, they can't do anything to change, there's no point to cry over spilled milk. What's there is there.

June's mother clearly seems to be a problem for her. In fact, June says that she never really enjoyed any good parenting in her life, that she increasingly realizes that she never had any parent who took care of her and taught her well. She says, for example, that she never learned manners from anybody.

"I had never been taught any kind of manners, like 'Please' or 'Thank you' or 'You're welcome' or anything like that. I never used to apologize if I did something wrong to somebody. I've lately gotten a lot better. Have started working on all of that, and I think I've gotten a lot better. Now I actually apologize for way too much stuff; I barely make somebody mad and I'm like, 'I'm sorry.'" She says she is also working more generally on a more positive attitude. "My mom's attitude made me a very negative person, and as of recently, I've been trying to be more positive about life, even though everything's been very negative recently. I've been trying to make it positive, and trying to make it a good thing." She elaborates:

> I try to be, like, grateful. I try to be positive, to wake up and think at least I'm alive today. I can still walk. I'm not blind. There's nothing too physically wrong with me. And I try to be thankful for those sorts of things. My son's in good health, even though he not with me. Try to look at the positive outlooks instead of all the bad things, that's what I'm doing.

I believe June's assertion that she is working hard to be positive and turn things around. That seems genuine. But it is also clear that June has not made a total break from some of her old life patterns. She has a lot to overcome.

What, I finally ask, does June ultimately want to get out of life? What would a good ending look like? "To be healthy, happy, to have a home, have my baby Ben, and for him to be healthy and happy. Have all my body parts, not be in a wheelchair, not be blind, or get any serious illnesses, anything like that. Pretty much I just want to be healthy and happy, that's really all I want to accomplish."

The interview ends. June's cell phone buzzes again. This time she answers. It's Frankie, wanting to know when she will be ready to leave. They are driving to somewhere in Ohio this evening to be part of some kind of weekend-long skateboard festival, which she says is going to be a "major big party." In fact, she needs the incentive money I am paying her for doing the interview to help afford the trip. We say goodbye, we shake hands, and off June goes.

Before heading back to the highway to drive home, I swing out on the business route through June's town to have a look around. I partly want to see if I can find the witchcraft store she mentioned. I can't. I also want to absorb a bit more of the social context of June's life. There are the usual gas stations, middle school, post office, aluminum-sided houses, and convenience stores. I pull over here and there to soak it all in. On the way out, right on the town's main drag, I notice an enormous red brick Baptist church. The parking lot is empty. But the big sign out by the road announces in large black plastic letters an upcoming performance by a gospel quartet, the Something or Other Brothers, who will be singing old-time gospel favorites. I look at the church building and imagine a partly filled sanctuary of nice, middle-aged and senior church members enjoying the gospel music in their pews on a Sunday evening. But I can't imagine June being any part of it. Her life was on a different track.

AMANDA

Amanda and I meet in a tourist town on the West Coast for lunch. We sit and talk at an outdoor table on a sunny deck overlooking the water, enjoying our salads, pizza, and conversation. Amanda is working that summer as a counselor at a religious overnight camp nearby and has agreed to devote her few hours off this week to our interview. She shows up just a little late, wearing funky clothes and a bright smile. She describes herself to me as "sweet and quiet, hard working, and considerate of others' feelings, though I wish I were more patient with other people and myself." She reports early on in the interview that she feels very blessed in life and has a wonderful family. The biggest challenges of people her age, Amanda reports, are "deciding who we are, the growing up process of separating from our parents and deciding for ourselves what we want to be and do, deciding a career, and relationships, and a lot of big decisions." Amanda is a history major in college, where she also takes voice lessons, sings in the chamber choir, belongs to a writer's club, and plays intramural sports. She says she has lost touch with most of her friends from high school, though she keeps in contact with a few by phone and MySpace.

It turns out that Amanda is quite involved in a small, very conservative evangelical denomination that encapsulates her life. Her father works on the staff of a high school academy run by her denomination, on whose grounds Amanda grew up and in which she herself was enrolled. Amanda is attending one of her denomination's colleges. She has recently traveled to Germany with one of her denomination's study abroad programs. And the summer camp at which she is currently working is owned and run by her denomination. All of her family are involved in her church, and her friends are also all members of this denomination. Amanda is quite aware that she had lived a pretty sheltered and parochial life. "A pretty small world," she admits.

At the same time, Amanda has recently struggled with a number of life transitions and difficulties. She has transferred colleges, programs, and living arrangements a few times. She suffered a devastating breakup with a boyfriend last year. And she is struggling with strained relationships with her father and brother. After graduating from high school, Amanda started at a denominational college on the East Coast, mostly to get away from all of her high school classmates who were planning to attend the denominational college closer to home. She enjoyed that, but then the next summer met a nice guy at her camp, one and a half years her junior, with whom she fell in love. They carried on a long-distance romantic relationship over her sophomore year, talking a lot on the phone. That spring, Amanda decided to transfer to the denominational college closer to home, where her boyfriend was enrolled, in order to be close to him. That involved a lot of moving around, but Amanda thought it would be worth it. Her boyfriend told her that he loved her, they talked about marriage, and, as she says, she gave him her heart. That summer they both worked at the same summer camp again, and their relationship grew increasingly physical. At that same time, Amanda observes in retrospect, he seemed to be becoming more emotionally distant. They talked less and less

and "made out heavily" more and more. They mostly kept their clothes on, Amanda says, but there was "touching" that she now regrets. At the beginning of the fall semester, he dropped "the break-up bomb." She didn't know why. He tried to explain about "not having things in common and being incompatible," but Amanda didn't believe anything he said. "He was just making up excuses," she explains. "I think all of a sudden he just saw in college that there were a lot more girls and worlds out there that interested him." Amanda was devastated. "It was crushing, really disappointing, I was brokenhearted. For the first week, I couldn't eat anything, I was a mess. Really traumatic."

During the prior year, Amanda's father had told her that he thought she and her boyfriend were getting too serious, that "it was too much, too fast, and he didn't approve of the way we were interacting." Amanda was furious about that and stopped talking to him for a long while. Then when Amanda's boyfriend dumped her, she felt "humiliated," realizing her father was probably right. But then she did not want to talk to him because of that. In the midst of all of this, Amanda's brother—with whom Amanda used to be very close—married a woman from the same denomination, who is more conservative than anyone else in Amanda's family, pulling her brother toward an extremely strict outlook. Amanda, by contrast, says that she is something of a "liberal" relative to her denominational standards—she wears some jewelry and drinks coffee, which is officially proscribed by her faith, and skips church some weekends when she is exhausted, which is frowned on. "I tweak religious values my own special way," she explains. "I have a slightly different lifestyle because I'm single and young and living in a different time than older people like my parents were." As a result, she and her brother have drifted apart, which makes Amanda sad. "I think I have withdrawn from him some, because his lifestyle has changed so much. There are things in life that I like and enjoy, so we're so different it's hard to talk anymore. I still want to be able to be myself, but I don't want to make him uncomfortable, and I feel sometimes he judges me." In these and other ways, Amanda has been working through some difficult experiences and feelings in recent years.

When it comes to religious faith and practice generally, however, Amanda strikes me as anything but liberal. Most of her beliefs are quite conservative and central to her life. She tries to go to church regularly, whether at home, college, or camp. Sometimes at college she also goes to vespers on Friday nights. In Germany, Amanda went to a Bible study every Wednesday. Amanda has done missions trips overseas, which have included leading teams of students and being a public speaker. She has volunteered in college, for religious motives, to teach English to immigrants. She is adamant about no sex before marriage and has stuck to that in situations where many teens would not have. She reports that her most debilitating sin is losing her temper, which she knows "is wrong." Amanda prays daily and reads her Bible a few times a week. She has experienced God's providence guiding her life, and in some instances has heard God speaking to her. When I ask Amanda what she believes religiously, she, unlike many her age, lays it all out:

> First and foremost, I believe that there is a God who is all-powerful and all-knowing, who created the whole universe. I believe what the Bible says about him. I believe that he is three, that there are three persons in God, not really sure how to explain that, but the whole Trinity concept. And that God sent his Son to die for us, every person, so that we could live forever. People who believe in Jesus and accept him as their Savior will be saved. When people die, they go to sleep but their bodies decay. When Jesus comes again the second time, to bring justice to the universe, there will be a judgment. Everyone will be raised back from the dead. God will recreate the bodies of the saved and will destroy those who do not believe, extinguish totally. He will cleanse the earth.

I ask Amanda why Jesus had to die on the cross, why he could not simply teach and die a natural death. "He had to come to die in order for us to be saved. He's taking the punishment of our sin, there has to be justice, so instead of us dying, Christ died, a real concrete expression of love and justice at the same time. He had to prove that what God does is out of love." So how, I ask, does all of this influence her life, if in any way? "I would definitely say it's a big influence in the way I live my life," Amanda replies, "the purpose I have in it, my attitude toward other people and why I'm here. I think it would really be hard for me to be happy and have a decent life, have something to look forward to, without faith." Amanda's religious beliefs come out strongly again when we discuss the basis of human morality:

> For me, morality is generally guided by religion. I look at most things for a moral I should know, read the Bible, figure it out. Everything for me is based off of "Love God, love other people." If anything is a contradiction to that, then it's bad. The big stuff, most of it is stated right in the Bible. God created the universe and it is governed by his character and therefore his character is good and love and mercy and all that. Then everything outside of that is bad. That's my explanation, and the Bible has a lot more specific examples that I can look [up] for reference.

For these reasons, Amanda feels she is different from most people her age. "I'm definitely not the norm because I live by my faith instead of, I feel most people don't when they're 21, in college, maybe partying a lot and living for themselves. I don't do any of that stuff." She admits that she feels "abnormal," but insists, "I know mine's a good lifestyle 'cause I think I'm happier where I'm at." When it comes to the idea of trying drugs, for example, Amanda declares, "I've smelled enough pot that I don't need to try it—overseas, big crowds of people blowing smoke in my face. It's gross, unhealthy, gives people bad breath, and they do things they don't control—it doesn't sound fun to me."

At the same time, Amanda's religious outlook is not rigidly ideological. Besides the "liberal" practice of wearing jewelry and drinking coffee, for instance, Amanda has enjoyed a few alcoholic drinks without qualms when traveling outside the United States—another breach of denominational

teachings. Asked about this, Amanda explains that her general approach to specific denominational prohibitions is "I try to research and find out, if the Bible does not necessarily state it and it doesn't go against my 'love of God, love your neighbor,' then it's okay." She notes that in one passage the Bible says that women should not braid their hair, yet women in her church do braid their hair, which makes her skeptical of biblical literalism. More generally, Amanda observes,

> My denomination tends to have a "we're right and everyone else is wrong" attitude. I don't think that's necessarily true, because, just from history, tons of different religious of people have had that attitude, and it's turned out they've been wrong. They've done terrible things. I think everyone probably has a piece of the truth and we're trying to make God a lot smaller than he is, trying to dictate every aspect of everything as either right or wrong. It's harder than that. If you take a commandment too hard, it becomes an idol.

Amanda also wants to build into her outlook an appreciation of human diversity. "There are different people, everything's different, and we all have different personalities and ways of worshiping. For me specifically, I'm really touched by words, I love poetry and writing, so reading the Psalms is just wonderful. But different genres in the Bible touch people in different ways, so differences in the Bible touch more people." So what about non-Christians, I ask?

> The best answer to that question is in C. S. Lewis's *The Last Battle.* Even if people do not have the gospel explained to them in words, there are still choices they make. How do you live your life? Are you going to live for yourself or others? Other religions, they don't necessarily have to call it God, but they can worship the Christian God. It's hard for me because I know the Bible says you have to worship Jesus. But if you don't know who Jesus is, how are you supposed to make that choice? Maybe God embraces everyone who really lives for him, whether they know it or not.

Amanda says she prefers the word "spiritual" to "religious," since " 'religion' carries connotations of organized church, so the term to me is so cold and logical." Amanda also tells me that she believes abortion is morally wrong but also that she knows that her mother has had an abortion. "So that's personal to me, and she had really good reasons. So it's a situation by situation thing." And on the question of her moral views of gays and lesbians, although Amanda believes same-sex sexual relations "violates what we are created for," she also says that "people are probably born with tendencies that aren't necessarily meant to be, but I don't think they're going to hell because of it."

So, how, I ask, has Amanda changed religiously and spiritually since her teenage years? "I think that now I'm a lot more willing to figure out on my own what I believe and not feel like I have to believe what somebody tells me is right. I feel like God is trying to get me to do that." She says she attends

church about as often, reads the Bible a little less, and prays a lot more. "Being older, you can pray in different ways, more personal ways to talk to God." Amanda says that although her faith tradition is pretty strict, her parents have encouraged her to "go out and discover on my own what I think is right. They didn't force me." In recent years, Amanda has in fact developed her own views about church and the Sabbath:

> For me, personally I choose not to go to church sometimes because I need the sleep, because the Sabbath was created for refreshment and rejuvenation and spiritual fulfillment. I think a lot of times that happens in organized churches—you have a support group there, can share, and all help each other kind of thing. There's a certain amount of value in hearing the pastor speak, too, who's gone to school and studied the Bible and had that wisdom and knowledge that he can share. So I think there's definitely a balance there. But I think a lot of times what I need the most is just some quiet time with God, and walking and taking a hike with some friends and playing guitar up a mountain. To me that's church. I believe that, but a lot of other people in my church don't.

Still, she says, in general, "even though I'm now on my own, most of the core beliefs I have grown up with are still true, as far as I stand."

What about Amanda's own possible religious doubts? I ask. "I haven't had doubts about my relationship to God, I've gotten stronger in my faith. But my faith in my own denomination has gotten weaker." Amanda explains that her beliefs have been strengthened by personal experiences of God's care. For example, while traveling in Europe she once somehow got herself into a bad situation—alone, late at night, in a big city, by herself, wearing bright clothes, without knowing the language, and unclear where to go. She felt frightened about being assaulted, which, judging by what she has said, seems to have been a real possibility. "I just prayed to God and walked in the middle of the street. And I felt such a strong presence of God, it was just the kind of thing you cannot explain away." She got to where she needed to go safely. Amanda also recounts other experiences of confusion and danger overseas when helpful people showed up in highly unlikely ways, seemingly from nowhere, and took care of her. "I've seen things that have happened that I believe providence did. I don't know if I'd go so far as to say that was an angel, just God's spirit." On occasion, Amanda believes God has even spoken to her: "It was so clear and distinct from my own voice, it was like he talked to me, though that doesn't happen a lot."

I ask Amanda to reflect on her view of the relevance of mainstream religion for young people in America today. She answers:

> Religion is not made for young people. Look at the entertainment aspect: even education, the average elementary school all the way through college, it's so oriented around movies, video games, entertainment, fun books. Why on earth would young people go to church if it doesn't offer anything personal as a reward, especially when church

> just tells them what they're doing wrong? Why would we go? To youth, it's boring. I myself didn't like going to church when I was younger, and sometimes still don't when I feel lectured at. I listen to lectures all week long, so that's not fun. It really doesn't give comfort when kids are doing all these things wrong in their lives. That's how a lot of youth view it.

Amanda also expresses her share of criticism of U.S. culture and politics. If she could change one thing about the world, for example, she said it would be for America to become "less consumer-driven. Like buying stuff and living the life you want is not important, compared to conserving the environment and helping people who are less advantaged. We in America lead our lives trying to collect all these things and we don't have time to enjoy them, I wish that would change." Amanda observes that many Europeans are more laid-back, which she likes. So she worries about America's "consumer-driven economy":

> If you don't need something, well, like girls, for instance, will go out and shop, like, for therapy, buy stuff they don't need in order to "make over" their closet and get rid of all their other stuff. It just seems like such a waste. The raw materials it takes to make all this stuff, aside from just clothes, it's a waste. Common sense says, first of all, our environment, all the stuff we do, the plastics, the gas [is too much]. To have all that money, all you need, why not give it to someone else who isn't quite as fortunate?

Amanda also expresses concern about the United States' military endeavors overseas. "I don't really appreciate our whole policing-the-world attitude. The Iraq and Afghanistan wars are a mess." At the same time, Amanda does not trust any American politicians, does not expect to vote in the next presidential election—"I don't feel like my vote would count"—and is not politically involved in any other way.

Still, when it comes to more interpersonal relations and behaviors, Amanda is clear about what she thinks. She believes, for example, that everyone has a moral responsibility to help others in need, because "it's kind and compassionate, and that's what God would do. Everybody's deserving. That's what God *did* do when he was here—not to do so is very selfish, just sad." In discussing her own work volunteering to teach English as a second language, she notes, "That was exciting, to me, that's the way to live out my faith. I find a lot more fulfillment in helping someone else. It wasn't religious, just teaching English, but still cool." When she gets older, Amanda says she plans to tithe fully 10 percent of her income to the church, though she gives away very little money now because she says she has so little to spare.

As the end of our interview approaches, Amanda reports that she intends to teach high school history when she graduates from college. In the long run, she wants to earn her doctorate. "I've always wanted to be a doctor." About other future goals, she says, "I want to publish something. I want to go on some more missions trips, finish college, learn how to do stuff like rock

climbing and dancing, stuff like that. That's what I want most." Amanda also desires to get married some day, though not soon. "Right now I'm just getting over my past relationship, and I don't really want to think of having one, personally, so I'm just waiting." But, she says, when the time comes, "I want to love somebody for life and have them love me for life, to be that close to somebody. You're committed to each other and it's that safe." Meanwhile, Amanda's rule about physical involvements now is "Anything that I would be ashamed of other people seeing, I'd try and stay away from." So what then, I ask, about the many young people her age who "hook up" for sex? She answers, "It seems like that would be pretty causal and potentially devastating for a lot of people. You just use people for physical gratification as the end result, which is pretty callous. It's out of touch, it should be more meaningful, seems pretty pointless." Amanda's view of cohabiting before marriage to test out one's relational compatibility is also not very sympathetic: "I think it's a great excuse to get all the good stuff without having a commitment." Her reaction to relativistic approaches to morality in general is also similar: "That's really wishy-washy. Some stuff is obviously wrong in every culture. That's where I have to come back to my belief on everything right or wrong is based off of God's character."

We finish up, and I wonder if I've gotten burned after sitting three hours in the sun. Amanda bids me a gracious goodbye and heads back to camp. I hang out a bit longer, enjoying the beautiful setting. I sit, trying to puzzle out the many life patterns and social forces that seem to be at work in the lives of the various emerging adults I am interviewing. They all seem so different. The diversity and complexity is immense. Yet I am beginning to hear some common themes. I hope, as I pack up, that I can come to better understand all of these matters by the time the interviews are completed.

CONCLUSION

There is, as we have said, no way for three emerging adults to somehow represent their entire age cohort. Brad, June, and Amanda are simply three young Americans, whose lives are quite different, whose stories serve here to introduce some life experiences that many emerging adults encounter, and whose stories will illustrate some of the findings that will emerge in later chapters of this book. If nothing else, their interviews reveal how broad a range of experiences American emerging adults can have in life. In other ways, far from being characteristic, the foregoing accounts have some highly atypical themes. For instance, Amanda's conservative views about sex before marriage, critique of mass consumerism, and expressed regrets about her past romantic relationship are unusual among her peers, as we will show in the next chapter. Still, Brad, June, and Amanda provide a helpful starting point from which to move forward and to which to refer back.[2]

10

Making Some Sense of It All

THIS CONCLUDING CHAPTER CONTAINS both summaries of what we have presented in this book as well as some of our own broader interpretations of our findings. In coming to the end of such an investigation, one has to remember the limits to the comprehension that is possible. There is no one summary perspective or integrated interpretation, much less set of identifiable social laws, by which emerging adult religion in America can be understood. Rather, a variety of trends, tendencies, conditions, casual mechanisms, and forces are involved that deserve attention. This conclusion will attempt to highlight and comment on some of the more important of these. But not every finding in this book will be reiterated, not every loose end tied up, and not every interpretive idea will necessarily fit into one, single, larger framework of understanding. What follow are merely some of what we think are the more important final points worth highlighting in closing.

TAKING SERIOUSLY A NEW LIFE PHASE

The starting point for our entire inquiry was taking seriously the new phase of young American life that has developed over the last four decades, known as emerging adulthood. Emerging adulthood is not simply an extension of teenage life, which normally remains highly dependent on parents and structured by high school. Nor is it the beginning of fully settled adulthood, as marked by marriage, children, career jobs, and home ownership. Rather, emerging adulthood embodies its own distinctive characteristics, tendencies, and experiences.

Many of these have implications for religious faith and spiritual life. This new phase of life is the product of a variety of social and technological changes, including the expansion of higher education, delays in the average age of marriage, transformations in the American and global economy, the growing readiness of many parents to extend material support to their children well after they leave home, and the development and easy access to a variety of affordable and relatively safe birth control technologies. As a result of these complicated social transformations, the transition from the teenage years to fully achieved adulthood has stretched out into an extended stage that is often amorphous, unstructured, and convoluted, lasting upward of 12 or more years. During this time frame, emerging adults experience a freedom that is historically unparalleled, a life structure that is often at most only loosely governed by older adult authorities. This enables emerging adults for many years to explore, experiment, discover, succeed or fail, move on, and try again. For many, this age is also marked not only by a lot of fun and growth but also by a great deal of transience, confusion, anxiety, self-obsession, melodrama, conflict, stress, disappointment, and sometimes emotional damage and bodily harm. It is a phase in life that needs to be taken seriously for American religion to be fully understood.

The emerging adult years often entail repeated life disruptions, transitions, and distractions—which poses challenges for sustaining religious commitments, investments, and practices. These years involve complex processes of incorporating new relationships and experiences into ongoing, developing lives, while sustaining and renegotiating old relationships with parents, siblings, friends, former adult mentors, and others. Religious faith, community involvement, and personal practices all are sorted out one way or another in this larger process of struggling to balance differentiation, consolidation, and integration of relations, identities, goals, and resources. Often an uncomfortable unevenness typifies this period, as emerging adults pursue lives with one foot in what seems like helpless dependence and another in what feels like complete autonomy and total responsibility. Most of them are at pains to keep open as many options as possible, to honor all forms of social and cultural diversity without judgment or even evaluation, and as quickly as possible to get on the road to autonomous self-sufficiency. Little of that encourages them to put down roots within particular religious communities that engage in committed faith practices. And that reluctance is reinforced by the postponement of family formation and childbearing, both of which tend to encourage religious investment. What is good and bad also seem to most emerging adults to be self-evident—it seems that no particular history or people or heritage or revelation or tradition are needed to navigate moral choices. And during the years before settling down for good, very many emerging adults believe that they are supposed to devote themselves to hanging out, partying, and perhaps drinking, doing drugs, and hooking up. Little in that encourages strong religious faith and practice.

At the same time, most emerging adults maintain ongoing relationships with their parents and other appreciated adult influences, which most of them

seem truly to value. And some of these older adults continue to encourage emerging adults in their religious and spiritual lives. Other emerging adults who have already survived serious life difficulties and breakdowns are working on getting their lives together, and many of them find religion to be a helpful resource in undertaking that challenging task. Further, a certain number of emerging adults have by family background simply always been, continue to be, and likely always will be very religious—whatever the challenges of emerging adult life. This historically new phase of life, then, involves a variety of forces, tendencies, and influences that shape religious outcomes. To adequately understand the religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults requires not simply collecting data on a certain age group, but more fully understanding the cultural and institutional contexts that emerging adults are in part generating and that in turn powerfully form their lives. Among these are mass-consumer capitalism, youth-targeted advertising, economic transformations, new career imperatives and strategies, mass education, revolutionary communications technologies, the proliferation of media programming, moral pluralism, and continuing waves of the sexual revolution. Religion, in short, must always be understood, if it is to be understood well, in the broader social, cultural, and economic contexts that shape it, help explain it, and give it meaning.

Part of gaining such an understanding is placing religion into age-comparative and historical perspective. Emerging adult religion, we have shown, is not typical of adults of all age groups in the United States. Younger adults in America tend to be significantly less religious in a variety of ways than older adults. Emerging adults are, on most sociological measures, clearly the least religious adults in the United States today. Catholic and mainline Protestant emerging adults tend especially to be less religious than evangelical Protestants and black Protestants. However, according to available evidence, emerging adults in America since 1972 have generally not become less religious, at least as measured by the variety of sociological survey questions examined in chapter 3. Most emerging adults have since 1972 either remained stable in their levels of religiousness or have actually increased somewhat. The significant exception to that rule is frequent church attendance by Catholic and mainline Protestant emerging adults, which has dropped noticeably in past decades. Thus, we see little evidence here of massive secularization among America's emerging adults in the last quarter century, at least the kind that survey questions are able to detect. At the same time, we must remember that the development of the new life phase of emerging adulthood was already in full swing by the 1970s. Our analysis does not involve data for ages 18 to 23 before the advent of emerging adult culture, so any possible religious changes associated with the development of emerging adulthood are not captured here. In short, emerging adults are as a whole less religious than are older adults and than they themselves were when they were teenagers; but today's emerging adults do not appear to be dramatically less religious than former generations of emerging adults have been, at lest going back to the early 1970s.

RELIGIOUS CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN INDIVIDUAL LIVES

Our study has established with new precision the extent and location of continuity and change in the religious lives of youth transitioning from the teenage into the emerging adult years. Popular conceptions of the matter typically suppose that this life course transition is marked simply by a massive overall decline in religious faith and practice. Some studies of emerging adults suggest that a major rupture during this transition breaks any observable connection between teenage religion and emerging adult religious faith and practice—such that one cannot anticipate the character of the latter by knowing features of the former. Others have even referred to the religious lives of young adults as a "black hole."[1] We find that these views and images point to certain elements of truth, but in the end we think they are overstated. We agree—to keep the metaphor going—in a very general sense that certain social and cultural forces at work during emerging adulthood, elucidated in the foregoing chapters, exert influences something like the powerful gravitational field of a black hole, which seems almost inexorably to pull everything that comes close enough to it into its consuming darkness. But we have also learned that those forces are not so strong that they always engulf all of the visible "light" of religion among youth simply because their lives have passed the demographic "event horizon" from the teenage years into emerging adulthood. Nor do our findings support the idea that the coming of emerging adulthood entails an overall, massive decline in religion. Nor again have we discovered a disorienting rupture between the teenage and emerging adult years breaking all continuities between them, so that emerging adults end up with inexplicably random religious outcomes as a result.

What we have found instead is the following. A little more than half of emerging adults remain quite stable in their levels of religious commitment and practice or lack thereof. That stability is found at the highest, moderate, and lowest levels of religiousness. A certain portion of highly religious teenagers remains highly religious as emerging adults, as do significant groups of moderately religious and not very religious teenagers. The primary conclusion about emerging adult religion, therefore, is not one of change but of continuity. More often than not, what's past is prologue.[2] The next largest group of emerging adults does reflect change in religious lives over the five years studied here. These tend to come from the somewhat less than highest ranks of teenage religiousness and represent nearly 40 percent of all emerging adults. Some of these cases decline modestly in religiousness, while others decline more sharply. Yet even in these cases, identifiable factors from their teenage lives enable us to differentiate them from those who remained highly religious in emerging adulthood. In other words, while there is less continuity in their *levels* of religiousness over time, there still *is* continuity in the kind of *characteristic factors* in their lives that lead to their collective religious decline. 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. Finally, small minorities of emerging adults counter the dominant trends by increasing

in religious faith and practice. These cases typically come from the lower end of teenage religiousness and grow over the five years examined here into much more highly religious emerging adults. These are the few new converts, the nominally religious making new commitments to God later in life, and those whose difficult nonreligious experiences have led them, like Joy and Andrea, to search for answers in new religious commitments.

Emerging adulthood tends both to raise the stakes on and remove social support for being seriously religious. As a result, many youth do pull back from, or entirely out of, religious faith and practice during their transitions out of the teenage years. For the most part, those who keep believing and practicing religion with serious devotion during the emerging adult years are those who were the most invested in religion to begin with, plus a very small group of newly religious emerging adults. But, it is worth noting, these more seriously committed emerging adults do in fact exist, and not simply as a struggling remnant. More than a few do buck the trends of religious decline and indifference. And another minority even more clearly bucks those trends by growing dramatically in their seriousness about religious faith and practice. So the myth of overall religious decline among emerging adults must be dispelled. At the same time, there is no denying that some emerging adults undergo a waning of their religious belief and practice during this life phase. Numerically, these outweigh those who are becoming more religious, so aggregate descriptive statistics sum to an overall noticeable decline in emerging adult religiousness. But that is an artifact of proportions in the simple calculating process of addition, subtraction, and no-change cases, which tends to mask underlying and more interesting facts. Those facts are that most emerging adults tend not to change religiously, many tend to decline, and a few tend to increase religiously. Distinguishing these different trajectories and their causes is much more revealing than simply pondering aggregate percentage sums.

THE POWER OF SOCIALIZATION

One of the most pervasive and powerful myths about children is that as they enter adolescence, their parents increasingly cease to matter in their lives. Adolescence is commonly—but mistakenly—assumed to be a phase during which parents become irrelevant, replaced instead by the influences of their peers, the media, and the children's own independent personalities and desires. In the course of the NSYR research, for example, we have repeatedly been told by parents things like "Ever since my daughter turned 13, she doesn't listen to me anymore." All too often, it seems, those parents then take such messages as opportunities to "check out" from a series of concerns or responsibilities about their children, which they tell themselves they no longer can influence anyway. This dynamic often seems to involve a mixture of not wanting to inappropriately control or meddle in their growing teenagers' lives, fear of being "uncool" by remaining too involved with them, a readiness to cooperate in not "embarrassing" their children by being part of groups involving their friends, and a sense of relief in being able to convince themselves that the job

of parenting is finished, however successfully or unsuccessfully. So when teenagers send signals to "Get out of my life," many parents seem all too ready to comply, even if with mixed emotions.[3] In short, most Americans have swallowed hook, line, and sinker the "Parents of teenagers are irrelevant" myth. So allegedly autonomous people ritualistically play out this myth in their own lives as a self-fulfilling prophecy, as if their fates as parents and children are predestined by divine oracle. Oddly, this withdrawal of parental influence on adolescents seems most especially evident when it comes to religious commitments and practices. Many parents remain at least somewhat concerned to continue to exert some control over things like their children's sports prospects, educational futures, and choice of marriage partners. But when it comes to religion, many parents seem keen not to "impose" anything or to "shove religion down their throats." Very often, as a result, many adolescents are thrown back on themselves and left floating in a directionless murk to figure out completely on their own some of life's most basic questions concerning reality, truth, goodness, value, morality, and identity. Thus, in the name of individual autonomy—informed here by a cultural myth that is sociologically erroneous—the usually most crucial players in teenagers' lives disengage from them precisely when they most need conversation partners to help sort through these weighty matters.

There is, of course, a germ of truth in the "Parents of teenagers are irrelevant" myth that makes it plausible. Adolescents and parents indeed are normally continually renegotiating the terms of their relationships. Teenagers do tend to become more independent from their parents over time. Teenagers can become quite absorbed into groups of peers. And adolescents often do go through phases and have characteristic situations where they do act like they want their parents to "butt out." But none of that actually means that parents have become irrelevant, that their influence is vanishing, that they no longer matter. Such teenage developments simply do not mean for parents that it is time to check out, that their children no longer need or often even want them to appropriately act like responsible parents who continue to invest in and talk with them about matters of importance. Most adolescents in fact still very badly want the loving input and engagement of their parents—more, in fact, than most parents ever realize.[4] They simply want that input and engagement on renegotiated grounds that take seriously their growing maturity and desired independence. All too often, however, parents misinterpret their teenager's signals about renegotiated relationships as simple demands to be entirely left alone and, for whatever reasons, they readily comply. So just at the time when teenagers most need engaged parents to help them work out a whole series of big questions about what they believe, think, value, feel, are committed to, and want to be and become, in many cases, their parents are withdrawing from them. Thus does American individualism leave its youth to themselves, thrown back on their own devices, often lacking the cognitive and emotional tools and concerned conversation partners needed to intelligently sort out life's big issues, including those about which religion makes claims.

What the best empirical evidence shows about the matter, however, is that even as the formation of faith and life play out in the lives of 18- to 23-year-olds, when it comes to religion, parents are in fact *hugely* important. Of the many teenage-era factors that our study investigated as possible influences on emerging adult religious outcomes, one of *the* most powerful factors was the religious lives of their parents—how often they attended religious services, how important religious faith was in their own lives, and so on. Those parental factors are always significantly related to outcomes in every statistical model, no matter how many other variables are also introduced into the equations. By contrast, it is well worth noting, the direct religious influence of *peers* during the teenage years—which common stereotypes say becomes all-important among teenagers—proved to have a significantly weaker and more qualified influence on emerging adult religious outcomes than parents. Parental influences, in short, trump peer influences. In addition, we know sociologically that the other very important teenage-era factors powerfully shaping emerging adult religious outcomes—frequency of prayer and scripture readings, having religious experiences, harboring few religious doubts, and believing in miracles—are normally also most powerfully formed by the influence of parents' beliefs and examples in these matters. In the long run, then, who and what parents were and are for their children when it comes to religious faith and practice are much more likely to "stick" with them, even into emerging adulthood, than who and what their teenage friends were.

Furthermore, it is not only parents who matter in forming the religion of emerging adults. Other nonparental adults in the lives of youth are often also important and, in certain circumstances, can actually "substitute" for parents as formative influences in the lives of youth. These may be other family members, such as grandparents or aunts and uncles. They may be congregational youth ministers or pastors. They may simply be other adult members of religious congregations who have reached out to youth and built meaningful personal relationships with them. Whatever the case may be, the empirical evidence tells us that it does in fact matter for emerging adult religious outcomes whether or not youth have had nonparental adults in their religious congregations to whom they could turn for help and support. It matters whether or not teenagers have belonged to congregations offering youth groups that they actually liked and wanted to be part of. It matters whether or not teenagers have participated in adult-taught religious education classes, such as Sunday school. Adult engagement with, role modeling for, and formation of youth simply matters a great deal for how they turn out after they leave the teenage years.[5] So, stated negatively, when adults who have bought into the common myths and stereotypes as a result disengage from the lives of teenagers who are on the road to emerging adulthood, these teenagers are forced to travel that road either alone or only with peers and, more likely than not, end up less religiously committed and practicing as emerging adults.

We see, then, that much about emerging adults' religious outcomes is explained by the elementary sociological principles of socialization. New members of any society are always inducted into the group by elder members who

form them in different ways to become active participants of various sorts. This is done through role modeling, teaching, taking-things-for-granted, sanctioning, training, practicing, and other means of inculcating and internalizing basic categories, assumptions, symbols, habits, beliefs, values, desires, norms, and practices. This is simply how most youth learn religion and everything else. And this provides the framework within which youth sort out over time how much religion matters to them, what, if anything, it means to them, and to what degree they will continue to practice religion or not. Thus, whether adults—particularly parents—know it or not and like it or not, they are in fact always socializing youth about religion. The question is never *whether* adults are engaged in religious socialization, but only *how* and with what effect they are doing so. The form, content, and intensity of religious socialization are therefore crucial in shaping the later religious outcomes of those being socialized. And since most of broader American society is not in the business of direct religious socialization, this task inevitably falls almost entirely to two main social entities. First are individual family households, where parents predictably do the primary socializing. Second are individual religious congregations, where other adults can exert socializing influences on youth. If nothing else, what the findings of this book clearly show is that for better or worse, these are the two crucial contexts of youth religious formation in the United States. If formation in faith does not happen there, it will—with rare exceptions—not happen anywhere.

THE DOMINANT OUTLOOK ON RELIGION

Not all emerging adults think about religion in the same way, but there definitely is a dominant outlook when it comes to religion. Most emerging adults are okay with talking about religion as a topic, although they are largely indifferent to it—religion is just not that important to most of them. So for the most part, they do not end up talking much about religion in their lives. To whatever extent they do talk about it, most of them think that most religions share the same core principles, which they generally believe are good. But the particularities of any given religion are peripheral trappings that can be more or less ignored. The best thing about religion is that it helps people to be good, to make good choices, to behave well. For this reason, it can be a good thing for children to be raised in a religious congregation, since they need to be taught the basics of morality. At the same time, once youth learn what it means to be good, there is no real need to continue being involved in a religious congregation. The time comes to "graduate" and move on. Some emerging adults do of course continue to be part of congregations, but few name them as important places of social belonging. Furthermore, among emerging adults, religious beliefs do not seem to be important, action-driving commitments, but rather mental assents to ideas that have few obvious consequences. What actually do have the power and authority to drive life instead are the feelings and inclinations of the emerging adults themselves. They as individuals can determine what is right, worthy, and important. So they themselves can pick and

choose from religion to take or leave what they want. At the same time, the personal outlooks of most emerging adults are highly qualified—sometimes even paralyzed—by their awareness of the relativity of their own cultural and social locations. The latter tend to undercut any confidence they might have in the possibility of holding true beliefs, rendering valid judgments, making worthy commitments. In any case, when it comes to authorities about knowledge, most emerging adults put a lot more weight on the empirical evidence, proof, and verified facts of science than on the claims of religious traditions, which, they believe, ultimately require "blind faith" to embrace. Even so, for the moral good that it can promote, most of mainstream religion in America is probably okay. It depends on the individual case, of course, but most religious leaders are probably well-meaning and are likely fairly harmless, not that it actually matters that much to most emerging adults. In any event, religion should always in the end remain a personal matter, something an individual may or may not choose to get into because it is meaningful to him or her. But when religion starts to become a primarily social or institutional concern, it tends to become rigid and inauthentic, which, needless to say, are bad. Finally, and overarching all of these assumptions and outlooks, most emerging adults are stuck at the place of thinking that nobody ultimately really knows what is true or right or good. It is all so relative and impossible to know in a pluralistic world with so many competing claims. Best, then, they suppose, to remain tentative, to keep options open, to not get too committed, to push dealing with religious matters off to some future date when through marriage and parenting it becomes more practically important. In the meanwhile, emerging adults have self-sufficiency to achieve, materially secure lifestyles to secure, and fun to be enjoyed.

THE CULTURAL TRIUMPH OF LIBERAL PROTESTANTISM

It is old news by now that mainline-liberal Protestant denominations in the United States are suffering major declines in membership and social prestige. Sociologists have for decades been documenting a hemorrhaging of members from mainline Protestant churches. And the religious and political ascendancy of American evangelicalism since the 1970s has drawn the spotlight away from the once mainstream religious presence of the more liberal Protestant churches. What was once mainline is now regularly dubbed the "sideline" and the "old-line." These are not the glory days of mainline-liberal Protestantism in America. Yet many observers are so focused on membership statistics and apparent political influences that they miss an important fact: that liberal Protestantism's organizational decline has been accompanied by and is in part arguably the consequence of the fact that liberal Protestantism has won a decisive, larger cultural victory. In this idea, we follow the argument of the University of Massachusetts sociologist of religion N. Jay Demerath, in a perceptive but we think underappreciated journal article he published in 1995 entitled "Cultural Victory and Organizational Defeat in the Paradoxical Decline of Liberal Protestantism."[6] Demerath's argument is fairly simple. "Far

from representing failure," he says, "the decline of Liberal Protestantism may actually stem from its success. It may be the painful structural consequences of [its] wider cultural triumph.... Liberal Protestants have lost structurally at the micro level precisely because they won culturally at the macro level." What Demerath means by this is that liberal Protestantism's core values—individualism, pluralism, emancipation, tolerance, free critical inquiry, and the authority of human experience—have come to so permeate broader American culture that its own churches as organizations have difficulty surviving. One reason for this development is that these very liberal values have a tendency to undermine organizational vitality. The strongest organizations are generally not built on individualism, diversity, autonomy, and criticism. Furthermore, having won the larger battle to shape mainstream culture, it becomes difficult to sustain a strong rationale for maintaining distinctively liberal church organizations to continue to promote those now omnipresent values. Liberal Protestantism increasingly seems redundant to the taken-for-granted mainstream that it has helped to create. Why organize to promote what is already hegemonic?

Evidence supporting Demerath's thesis was abundant in the NSYR interviews with emerging adults. Their dominant discourse about religion, faith, and God—as prefigured in chapter 2 and developed in chapters 5 and 7—often clearly reflected the basic cultural values and sometime speech modes of liberal Protestantism. Individual autonomy, unbounded tolerance, freedom from authorities, the affirmation of pluralism, the centrality of human self-consciousness, the practical value of moral religion, epistemological skepticism, and an instinctive aversion to anything "dogmatic" or committed to particulars were routinely taken for granted by respondents. So, assuming they had not already become irreligious "cultural despisers of religion"—whom the liberal Protestant Friedrich Schleiermacher was keen to win over with apology[7]—most Catholic and Jewish emerging adults, for example, talked very much like classical liberal Protestants. Many evangelical Protestant and black Protestant emerging adults even talked like liberal Protestants. And very many mainline Protestant emerging adults simply could not care enough to talk about religion in any specific terms, but those who did in fact usually talked like classical liberal Protestants. In short, many emerging adults would be quite comfortable with the kind of liberal faith described by the Yale theologian H. Richard Niebuhr in 1937 as being about "a God without wrath [who] brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross."[8] They simply would have no idea about the genealogy of their taken-for-granted ideas, that is, from where historically they came. On more than a few occasions, in fact, while listening to emerging adults explain their views of religion, it struck us that they might just as well be paraphrasing passages from classical liberal Protestant theologians, of whom they have no doubt actually never heard, from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The likes of Adolf von Harnack, Albrecht Ritschl, Wilhelm Hermann, and Harry Emerson Fosdick would be proud. People, it is clear, need not study liberal Protestant theology to be well inducted into

its worldview, since it has simply become part of the cultural air that many Americans now breathe.

The one crucial thing emerging adults plainly do *not* share with the classic liberal Protestant outlook, however, is its characteristic humanistic optimism about historical progress and the growth of the kingdom of God through cultural development and political reform. This would make no sense to emerging adults today. They are, as we have shown, highly optimistic about their own personal futures. But they are dubious about the future of society, politics, and the world beyond their individual lives. They do not see God working immanently in the movement of history. They doubt that historical Progress is real, not that they think about it much. Few feel compelled to get involved in public life, whether for religious or other reasons. And among emerging adults, liberal Protestantism's social gospel is out of gas. That liberal movement, which historically called Christians to face urban blight and industrial exploitation by asking the question "What would Jesus do?"[9] has already, for this generation, been co-opted and tamed by the brief evangelical youth fad of wearing "WWJD?" bracelets. The civic and political worlds are simply much too confusing and discouraging to emerging adults today for them to have much hope for rising above hopelessness and distraction. In any case, working, studying for classes, chatting and texting with friends, keeping up with social networking websites, and hanging out at parties keeps emerging adults too busy to worry much about public life and the common good. In this sense, among emerging adults, the individualistic humanism and personal moralism of liberal Protestantism have overrun and eradicated its historical emphasis on social and political responsibility for reform and betterment. So the liberal Protestantism that has culturally diffused in youth culture is a rather selective version of that larger tradition.

Even so, liberal Protestants have more to be happy about than it seems they often realize. The obvious breakdown of liberal Protestantism at one level in fact signals a larger triumph in performance on a much more important stage. And evangelical Protestants, if we are correct here, should have much more to worry about than their apparent recent successes, measured in church membership numbers and recent political attention, might lead them and other observers to assume. That is because a historical nemesis of evangelicalism, liberal Protestantism, can afford to be losing its organizational battles now precisely because long ago it effectively won the bigger, more important struggle over culture. Liberal Protestantism's last word may be more diffuse in cultural discourse, but no less influential as a result. And ideas and values that are the most invisible are precisely also those that, as a result, are the most powerful. Therefore, if we wish to understand the religious and spiritual lives of contemporary American emerging adults, we must not lose sight of the power liberal Protestantism still exerts among the majority of them through its cultural formation of the dominant, taken-for-granted terms of discourse, valuation, and outlook, in ways and with influence about which most emerging adults have no idea.

CULTURAL MUTATIONS OF EVANGELICAL PROTESTANTISM

Liberal Protestantism is not the only big religious tradition that has formed the contemporary emerging adult world. The evangelical Protestant tradition has also laid down some of the tracks on which run important trains of contemporary emerging adult thoughts about religion. We begin to clue into the significant background influence of evangelical religious culture more broadly when, for example, we hear a committed American Muslim girl speaking glowingly about her "personal relationship with God."[10] Something curious is going on there. But evangelical influences run much deeper and wider than simply the diffusion of particular bits of evangelical popular lingo. Many emerging adult attitudes about religion represent no more than somewhat mutated versions of core, historical evangelical theological themes. For example, it is the centuries-old, central evangelical insistence on the ultimate consequence of each individual's salvation in standing alone before a holy God that emerging adults are resonating when they articulate their radically individualistic view of religious faith and practice. Each individual stands alone in matters of faith, ultimately unaffected by and not accountable to any other human. All that is needed is to decenter the holy God part of the scenario, and what is left is the autonomous individual. Emerging adults carry this individualism to new and—from evangelicalism's point of view—misguided levels and directions.[11] But the places where today's emerging adults have taken that individualism in religion basically continues the cultural trajectory launched by Martin Luther five centuries ago and propelled along the way by the subsequent development of evangelical individualism, through revivalism, evangelism, and pietism. The same is true of emerging adults' antiinstitutional view of religion. When emerging adults say that religion is really a personal affair that is sullied by the restrictions and artificialities of social institutions, including religious institutions, they are echoing the strong antiinstitutional bias that has characterized American evangelicalism since the revolutionary era.[12] Against Roman Catholicism, which emphasizes the church as a visible social institution carrying on the "deposit of faith" as a historical tradition, American Protestantism has insisted on a view of the church as essentially a local voluntary organization guided solely by divine revelation in the Bible, which is accessible to all individual believers, and uncorrupted by (unbiblical) human "traditions." Evangelical doctrines of the church thus strongly tend to code institutions themselves as ultimately superfluous to what *really* matters, and human traditions as suspect, if not dangerous, to the true faith. The dominant emerging adult view of religious congregations and traditions that respondents repeatedly expressed in the interviews is in fact only a few steps down the line from the most traditional or "biblical" evangelical theologies of the church.

Furthermore, the strong individualistic subjectivism in the emerging adult religious outlook—that "truth" should be decided by "what seems right" to individuals, based on their personal experience and feelings—also has deep cultural-structural roots in American evangelicalism. Again, the center of

American evangelicalism has long resisted formal confessional and episcopal traditions as representations and carriers of theological truth. Rather, only the Bible—*sola scriptura*—tells the truth. And the Bible, evangelicalism has taught, is not only infallible but also clear in its teachings, so that each individual can read it and know and understand its truth.[13] Few evangelicals know that, originally, it was in fact liberal Protestant activists in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries who insisted most absolutely that any ordinary person could sit down with the Bible and understand all of its teachings. These liberal activists used that argument to challenge the dominant, "orthodox" Calvinism of their day, which they believed taught unbiblical and increasingly unfashionable doctrines, such as divine predestination to heaven and hell.[14] Evangelicals themselves, however, quickly picked up and took over this every-layperson-can-understand-the-Bible belief in order to promote democratized Bible study in the young democracy, in which people were being encouraged to "pull themselves up by their own bootstraps." It thus became the sacred right and responsibility of all individuals to read the Bible and understand it for themselves. Right theology no longer needed to be preached by the seminary-educated pastor. All persons could simply read, understand, decide, and know the biblical truth for themselves. Naturally, within evangelicalism, final authority was and is supposed to reside in the Bible, not the reader. But as it turned out, in the American evangelical experience, different well-intentioned readers ended up saying that the Bible taught many different things, which produced massive denominational fragmentation. In the course of events, the nation also ended up fighting a horrifically bloody civil war in part because it could not agree on what the Bible taught about slavery.[15] Thus, having democratized to every individual the full authority to know religious truth for themselves, yet having failed thereby to produce anything like an agreement about what the Bible actually teaches, evangelical biblicism set up powerful religious cultural structures that, it so happens, govern many non-evangelical (and evangelical) emerging adults today. Young Americans' assurance that the Bible, or any other alleged authority, contains the truth by which to live has, compared to evangelical convictions, been severely weakened. And in the intervening years, for complicated reasons, final authority has decisively shifted from the Bible to the individual reader. But most emerging adults' basic assumption that it is the right and responsibility of each individual to decide religious truth for himself or herself—based on his or her own "reading" of relevant matters—is in fact simply one cultural mutation away from historic evangelical orthodoxy.

Finally, contemporary emerging adults' positive valuation of religion primarily because of the practical benefits it bestows on individual lives in the form of moral behaviors also has cultural roots in American evangelicalism. Mark Noll, among others, has clearly described the key emphasis in historical American evangelicalism on the centrality of practical activism.[16] Evangelicalism was never essentially a religion of contemplation, mysticism, or careful intellectual scholarship. Rather, it was about the gospel leading to personal transformation and—especially after the Second Great Awakening—moral reform activism.

Evangelicals (and liberals, in a different way) have long believed that faith does and must have real consequences, that it should make an observable difference in the person and in the world. Once a soul has secured its way to heaven through personal conversion, it must then devote itself to sanctification and self-reform. Often, the methods (think *Method*ism) and purposes of this have been very pragmatic—to end alcoholism, gambling, sexual immorality, and other forms of "worldliness" that threaten personal and family well-being. Further, to the extent that evangelicals have historically more or less believed America to be something like a special nation chosen by God, salvation ought also to have consequences for the betterment of the nation.[17] The conversionism central to evangelical revivals, evangelistic crusades, and altar calls is not simply about conveying new ideas, but is also about visceral repentance from sin, dramatically changing lives, and giving believers "new hearts" so they can live upright lives to the glory of God.[18] Such a version of the gospel, which emphasized practical, personal results of religious conversion and subsequent sanctified activity in holiness, turns out to have been set up to slip, and has in fact very easily slipped, into a popular mentality about religion that presumes that the sum total purpose and value of religion per se are simply the practical benefits it affords believers. Religious faith becomes good *if* and *because* it makes people do better, if it helps them live more moral lives. That itself has become religion's very raison d'être, its legitimating purpose and value, for which it may be appreciated. Along the way, God can get lost in the shuffle. Of course, historical evangelicalism was not purposely intended to promote such an outcome. But that, with a bit of cultural mutation, is what the internal structure of evangelical religious culture has facilitated. Thus, while evangelical readers may be among the most concerned about some of the religious trends described in this book, they would be myopic not to see that some very particular features of historical evangelicalism have themselves deeply structured many of the religious cultural categories and mentalities that today's emerging adults are using to make sense of their world.

SOVEREIGN INDIVIDUALS LACKING CONVICTION OR DIRECTION

One of the important larger conditions that it is necessary to grasp in order to understand emerging adult life is (what in our view is) the contemporary cultural crisis of knowledge and value. Emerging adults have been raised in a world involving certain outlooks and assumptions that they have clearly absorbed and that they in turn largely affirm and reinforce. Stated in philosophical terms, their world has undergone a significant epistemic and axiological breakdown. It is difficult if not impossible in this world that has come to be to actually know anything objectively real or true that can be rationally maintained in a way that might require people actually to change their minds or lives. Emerging adults know quite well how they personally were raised in their families, and they know fairly well how they generally "feel" about things. But they are also aware that all knowledge and value are historically

conditioned and culturally relative. And they have not, in our view, been equipped with the intellectual and moral tools to know what to do with that fact. So most simply choose to believe and live by whatever subjectively feels "right" to them, and to try not to seriously assess, much less criticize, anything else that anyone else has chosen to believe, feel, or do. Whether or not they use these words to say it, for most emerging adults, in the end, it's all relative. One thought or opinion isn't more defensible than any other. One way of life cannot claim to be better than others. Some moral beliefs may personally *feel* right, but no moral belief can rationally claim to be really true, because that implies criticizing or discounting other moral beliefs. And that would be rude, presumptuous, intolerant, and unfeeling. This is what we mean when we use the terms *crisis* and *breakdown*.

Such a condition arguably encourages the true virtues of humility and openness to difference—precious commodities, we think, that are all too scarce in the world today. But when life's push comes to shove for emerging adults, such a condition also thwarts many of them from ever being able to decide what they believe is really true, right, and good. Thus, their commonly unsettled lifestyles are often accompanied by a troubling uncertainty about basic knowledge and values. Very many emerging adults simply don't know how to think about things, what is right, or what is deserving for them to devote their lives to. On such matters, they are very often simply paralyzed, wishing they could be more definite, wanting to move forward, but simply not knowing how they might possibly know anything worthy of conviction and dedication. Instead, very many emerging adults exist in a state of basic indecision, confusion, and fuzziness. The world they have inherited, as best as they can make sense of it, has told them that real knowledge is impossible and genuine values are illusions. Behind this, we think, are in part the powerful influences of various intellectual and cultural movements that have saturated the institutional worlds in which most emerging adults have grown up. One of those is academia's wave of deconstructive postmodernism, which has sought to reduce all knowledge and value claims to arbitrary exertions of power and control.[19] Another is the glut and fragmentation of information on the Internet and elsewhere, which lacks authorized gatekeepers to judge, evaluate, and rank the merits or value of its excess of data. Yet another is the diffuse influence of anthropological and sociological teachings on social constructionism and cultural relativism, which undercut any sense of objective standards for evaluating self and others. Still another influence comes from various multicultural movements, particularly as taught in schools—many of which we think have real value but which also, in their less thoughtful modes, often degenerate into mere assertions that all differences of any type must simply be accepted without reflection, dialogue, or assessment.

Whatever the relative worth of these various movements and trends, their intended and unintended effects have clearly powerfully shaped emerging adults today. In some ways, this has been for the good, we think. But in other ways, the effects have been confusing and debilitating. Emerging adults struggle earnestly to establish themselves as autonomous and sovereign individuals.

But the crises of knowledge and value that have so powerfully formed their lives leaves them lacking in conviction or direction to even know what to do with their prized sovereignty. Emerging adults are determined to be free. But they do not know what is worth doing with their freedom. They work very hard to stand on their own two feet. But they do not really know where they ought to go and why, once they are standing. They lack larger visions of what is true and real and good, in both the private and the public realms. And so, it seems to us, a small set of predefined default imperatives quickly rush in to fill that normative and moral vacuum. One of those is mass consumerism's slavish obsession with private material comfort and possessions, the achieving of which nearly every emerging adultviews as a key purpose in life. Other imperatives, in the meantime, may be the amusements of alcohol and drug intoxication and the temporary thrills of hook-up sex. Yet even in the early emerging adult years, signs were evident to us that many already find these culturally given, default purposes, amusements, and thrills unsatisfying, if not outright wounding. Many know there must be something more, and they want it. Many are uncomfortable with their inability to make truth statements and moral claims without killing them with the death of a thousand qualifications. But they do not know what to do about that, given the crisis of truth and values that has destabilized their culture. And so they simply carry on as best they can, as sovereign, autonomous, empowered individuals who lack a reliable basis for any particular conviction or direction by which to guide their lives.

A DIVERSITY OF TYPES AND TRAJECTORIES

Much of this chapter's summary has focused on generalizations that apply to the majority of today's emerging adults. Such generalizations are important and can be illuminating. However, even as we process findings about the central tendencies observable among emerging adults, we must also remember that emerging adult religion comprises considerable diversity. About 15 percent of emerging adults are what we call Committed Traditionalists, who embrace a strong religious faith, whose beliefs they can reasonably well articulate and which they actively practice. About 30 percent are what we label Selective Adherents, who believe and perform certain aspects of their religious traditions but neglect and ignore others. Something like 25 percent are Religiously Indifferent, who neither care to practice religion nor oppose it. About 15 percent are Spiritually Open—not personally very committed to a religious faith but nonetheless receptive to and at least mildly interested in some spiritual or religious matters. Another 5 percent are Religiously Disconnected, who have little to no exposure or connection to religious people, ideas, or organizations. And a final 10 percent is positively Irreligious, holding skeptical attitudes about and making critical arguments against religion generally, rejecting the idea of personal faith. Much of what we have offered as generalizations that pertain to the majority of emerging adults may apply differently or sometimes may not apply at all to different religious groups in this typology. Below the

level of valid generalizations, in other words, many nuances, qualifications, exceptions, and counternarratives of various sorts remain that are well worth taking into account. Every valid study of emerging adult religion must therefore balance the lumping and the splitting, the general and the particular, the dominant and the alternative, the similar and the diverse. Taking either side too far produces a distorted view. We hope especially that this typology of six emerging adult religious categories presented in chapter 6, along with both the "less typical" cultural themes presented in chapters 2 and 4 and the multiple change trajectory slopes using growth mixture modeling plotted in chapter 8, help to balance some of the larger generalizations also offered in this book.

ARE EMERGING ADULTS INTERESTED IN "SPIRITUALITY?"

A quite common belief about emerging adults nowadays is that they are very interested in matters spiritual. Surveys of emerging adults, particularly by educational researchers of those enrolled in colleges and universities, repeatedly report high levels among them of interest in "spirituality." All of this seems to connect to the phrase, commonly heard in the media, about young people today being "spiritual but not religious" or being "spiritual seekers." And various popular books report that youth today are keen on spiritual matters but hate churches and traditional religion. We do think, on the basis of the NSYR findings, that there is some basis in fact for these claims and ideas. But we think that these claims are often exaggerated and misunderstood. In our study, we found that roughly 15 percent of emerging adults are what we called Spiritually Open. We definitely did see a somewhat greater readiness, especially among some of those teenagers who had previously been not very religious, to consider the idea that spiritual, supernatural, or divine things may be real and worth learning about. And there is definitely a larger segment among emerging adults than among teenagers that feels alienated from religious faith and organized religion. But we think the recognition of these facts needs to be tempered and put into context by realistic proportions and perspectives, as follows.

First, a solid majority of emerging adults simply are not that interested in matters religious or spiritual. They are either Selective Adherents who do what they want religiously and otherwise do not pay it much mind; or they are Religiously Indifferent, simply not really caring one way or the other; or they are Religiously Disconnected, simply lacking the social and institutional ties to religion to know or care that much about it in the first place. Think, for example, of Brad, Andy, and June. Beyond them, the Irreligious are not interested in "spirituality," other than to criticize it. Remember Ruth. Thus, it is primarily among the Committed Traditionalists and the Spiritually Open that genuine interest in spiritual matters is to be found. However, for most of the Committed Traditionalists, "spirituality" is not some free-floating experience of individualistic interiority and self-exploration—rather, it concerns specific practices, meanings, and experiences that are fairly closely tied to traditional religious faiths. Think of Amanda and Joy. Furthermore, among

most of the Spiritually Open, "spirituality" is not the "holy grail–like" object of sustained, high-priority, personal quests to realize divine enlightenment or ultimate meaning. Most are in fact nothing more than simply *open*. They are not *actively* seeking, not taking a lot of initiative in pursuit of the spiritual. Someday it might come, but in the meantime they are not going after it as a project in life. They think about spiritual matters sometimes. They are happy to talk about spirituality in the right contexts. They have a lot of questions and uncertainties. And they are willing to entertain the possibility that reality consists of more than energy and matter, that the universe is not finally random and purposeless, that there could be more to reality than meets the eye. Beyond that, the seeking is often minimal. In this sense, Andrea is an example of a Spiritually Open emerging adult who is more actively seeking than are most. Therefore, while there is definitely some interest and openness to spiritual matters among today's emerging adults, it is not as pervasive and intense as some accounts say it is.

We suspect that one of the reasons some survey research reports higher levels of interest in spirituality among emerging adults than we found is this: the surveys themselves are constructed in a way that leaves the language of "spirituality" as the only way for respondents to register any kind of religious or nonatheistic interest. Thus, all respondents—from the most rigidly fundamentalist to the most nominal of Catholics or mainline Protestants to the most confused, nonatheistic, nonreligious emerging adult—get funneled as a matter of methodological procedure into the category of "is interested in spirituality," when in fact the reality is much more complex than that. And the more "spirituality" is discussed in the media with some fascination, the fewer emerging adults sitting with survey bubble sheets in hand will report that they are not interested in spirituality. Increasingly, to say such a thing seems to mean that one has no interest in one's own subjective, interior life. Meanwhile, there is no real cost to reporting on a survey that one cares about spiritual things. In this way, we suspect, emerging adult interest in spirituality may often be overestimated by survey research. Another analogous way to distort the actual extent of spiritual seeking or of a warm embrace of spirituality coupled with the angry rejection of organized or traditional religion is to conduct interviews with nonrepresentative samples of emerging adults whose speech validates the kind of interpretive story one wants to tell about religion. In our observation, these tend to take one of two typical forms. First are books and articles by authors who are themselves alienated from mainstream religion and wish to promote a "spiritual but not religious" agenda. Second are publications by pastoral and ecclesial reformers within mainstream religion—usually younger evangelical Protestants—who want to make the case that traditional churches are failing to reach young people today and so need to be dramatically transformed in a postmodern or some other allegedly promising way.

Again, there are elements of truth in both claims. Some people are "spiritual but not religious," and many traditional churches are often not effectively "reaching" young people today. Our point is not that those claims are entirely bogus. Our point is that what is true in them is often blown far out

of proportion, misrepresenting the true extent and intensity of such attitudes about religion and spirituality among American emerging adults today. It is important, then, that we distinguish between the findings of good social science, the reports of methodologically limited survey research, and the claims of cultural and religious activists who are pushing their own agendas. All may be legitimate in their own ways. But they are not the same things. And their conclusions ought not to be consumed by readers and hearers with equal naïveté. So yes, some emerging adults, including students in college, are interested in spirituality. But for a good number of them, that simply means doing traditional religion. And for another chunk of them, that means they simply do not want to say that they are positively *not* interested in spirituality. Yet others may say whatever about matters spiritual but in fact are simply too distracted by other affairs to care very much. Only for quite a small minority of emerging adults are spiritual seeking and practicing lives that are spiritual-but-not-religious on the priority list—certainly more than among teenagers, but not all that much more.

POSITIVE LIFE OUTCOMES, NONETHELESS

Whatever else we might observe about emerging adulthood, religious continuity and change, influences of socialization, and the transformation of American religious culture, one other finding of this book merits underscoring before closing. That is that emerging adult religion—whatever its depth, character, and substance—correlates significantly with, and we think actually often acts as a causal influence producing, what most consider to be more positive outcomes in life for emerging adults. Whether we focus on relationships with parents, giving and volunteering, participation in organized activities, substance abuse, risky behaviors, moral compassion, physical health, bodily self-image, mental and emotional well-being, locus of control, life satisfaction, life purpose, feeling gratitude, educational achievement, resistance to consumerism, pornography use, or potentially problematic sexual activity, the more religious emerging adults are consistently doing better on these measures than the least religious emerging adults. These differences hold up even after controlling statistically for the possible influence of the seven variables of age, sex, race, region of residence, parental education, individual income, and parental assistance with expenses. We found no major or consistent differences between life outcomes and major religious traditions. Differences had to do not with belonging to one or another religious category—such as evangelical Protestant or Catholic or black Protestant—but rather with level of personal importance of faith and practice, in the forms of religious service attendance and prayer. Although the differences are sometimes only statistically significant for the most religiously devoted emerging adults, the overall patterns of difference clearly tend to work in linear fashion with progressively higher levels of religiousness. Thus, even among emerging adults, it is not the case that religion does not matter for forming the shapes of their lives. It does. Emerging adults who are more religious are living developing lives that

undeniably look, feel, and produce results that are quantifiably different from those of the least religious emerging adults. And we have many good reasons to believe that religious faith and practice are at least partly the cause of those differences. Religion thus makes important differences in areas of life that matter to nearly everyone and have consequences for collective well-being and social and financial costs for society as a whole. Far from having dwindled into irrelevance, religion still matters and makes a positive difference in the lives of America's emerging adults.

CONCLUSION

Religion shapes society and culture. And social institutions and culture shape religion. Individual persons are powerfully formed by the traditions, cultures, and institutions in which they are raised and live their lives. Yet all people make ongoing choices and commitments and engage in practices that also affect the character and outcomes of their own lives and collectively sustain and shape the larger social world. In these ways, the continual exercise of social structurally shaped human agency gives rise to and sustains the same and other social and cultural structures, even while those social and cultural structures continue to form human persons precisely through their developing exercise of their own agency. All of this is very evident in the lives of emerging adults, including if not especially in their religious and spiritual lives. Notwithstanding their devotion to the ideas of personal freedom, autonomy, and self-direction, the lives of emerging adults are in fact profoundly formed and governed by the social and cultural structures of the world into which they are growing. At the same time, many of the same social and cultural structures are sustained and perpetuated only because millions of emerging adults and others involved in their lives have internalized and, through their ongoing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, maintain them. No particular life is entirely determined by the social and cultural structures that it encounters and reproduces. But every emerging adult's life also in different ways clearly embodies and reflects the qualities and influences of the social and cultural structures in and by which it is lived. Swept along by powerful cultural and institutional currents, emerging adults sometimes even think, feel, and behave in ways that they do not understand or maybe even really want. That is the power of social life in and on individual persons. Emerging adulthood involves a host of particular social and cultural features and experiences that are characteristic of its newly existent phase in American life. And the religious and spiritual interests, assumptions, beliefs, experiences, values, and practices of emerging adults are always and in many ways powerfully formed by those social and cultural features and experiences.

Therefore, if emerging adults want in fact to pursue lives that are genuinely free and self-directed in ways that are worthy of their commitment and devotion, they will have to come to terms with many of the larger social and cultural forces to which their lives are now subject that do not obviously serve that end. They will have to exercise understanding and agency in ways that

do not simply reproduce but rather challenge some of the more problematic aspects of emerging adult culture and life. And if communities of other adults who care about youth wish to nurture emerging adult lives of purpose, meaning, and character—instead of confusion, drifting, and shallowness—they will need to do better jobs of seriously engaging youth from early on and not cut them adrift as they move through the teenage years. More broadly, if anyone in the future is ever to know what is really good, right, and true, the challenges of the crises of knowledge and value that beset American culture today, described earlier, must be addressed, in order to learn more justifiably sure-footed ways to understand reality and the moral good. Lacking that, American culture has little to pass on to American youth with which they can navigate life beyond their experiences of their own subjective desires and feelings—on which alone it is not possible to build good lives. Finally, if traditions and communities of religious faith want better to foster ways that more of their own emerging adults can engage in lives of serious religious faith and practice, they, too, will have to come to terms with the social, cultural, and institutional structures and forces that govern emerging adulthood and shape religion and spirituality during this phase of life. It will not be enough simply to purify one's theological ideas or to ramp up new programs supposedly "relevant" to young people. The larger challenges to engage here are immense, and, complicating matters, certain religious traditions themselves—particularly liberal and evangelical Protestantism, as described above—are implicated in the structured character of emerging adulthood.

Yet, as noted, nothing is determined or static. Society, culture, and institutions are always evolving. Exactly where American culture and society, emerging adulthood itself, and religious communities and traditions in particular actually end up going in the future will in some measure be shaped by the beliefs, desires, commitments, decisions, and actions of emerging adults and those who care about their lives. Our purpose in writing this book has been to shed light on many crucial facts, issues, problems, challenges, and opportunities related to the religious, spiritual, and, more generally, personal and social lives of emerging adults in America. What comes next has yet to be written by the very people who have been the subject of this study.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. To avoid confusion, we will use the first person plural—*we, us, our*—throughout to refer to this book's coauthors, except in certain parts that, we will note, will be recounted by Christian Smith (and in which we will use the first person—*I, me, my,* etc.).

2. The meaning of this term is explained later. Here we wish to say that our use of the word "emerging" is not intended to have any connection to the movement currently afoot among certain generally younger Christians in the United States known as the "emerging church," "emergent church," about which this book takes no particular position.

3. For detailed information about the research methodology used in the first wave of NSYR, see Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Methodological Design and Procedures for the National Survey of Youth and Religion (NSYR)* (Chapel Hill, NC: National Study of Youth and Religion, 2003); Christian Smith, with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 272–310.

4. Smith with Denton, *Soul Searching*.

5. For detailed information about the research methodology used in the second wave of the NSYR, see Christian Smith, Lisa Pearce, and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Methodological Design and Procedures for the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) Longitudinal Telephone Survey (Waves 1 & 2)* (Chapel Hill, NC: National Study of Youth and Religion, 2006).

6. See Christian Smith, Lisa Pearce, and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *National Study of Youth and Religion Telephone Survey Codebook Introduction and Methods (Waves 1, 2 & 3)* (Chapel Hill, NC: National Study of Youth and Religion, 2008).

7. Additional information about empirical data that this book analyzes and interets, which serve as the basis of its findings and story, is as follows (and described in rther depth in appendix B). The data come, as noted, from a nationally representave telephone survey of 2,532 18- to 23-year-old Americans and in-depth personal terviews conducted with a subsample of 230 of those survey respondents living in ' states around the United States (all states but Alaska, Hawaii, Tennessee, Arkansas, wa, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota, Wyoming, Colodo, and Montana). (In addition, chapter 2 presents findings from analyses of data ɔm the GSS, years 1972 to 2006.) Of these 230 interview respondents, 158 had been terviewed before in prior waves of the study, and 71 were interviewed for the first ne in this third wave. The new interviewees were introduced in order to refresh the mple and to check through the comparison of their answers with those of prior interewees for the possible "contamination" or "training" of their interview answers as a ɜult of their experience of completing prior interviews (the interviews in fact did not ggest that this happened). All participants in this sample were originally recruited take part in a nationally representative, random-digit-dial telephone survey first nducted in 2002 and 2003. Those participants were at that time randomly sampled d shown by subsequent analyses to closely represent all American youth of that age ɔup (see Smith and Denton, *Methodological Design and Procedures*). Between surɣ waves, NSYR researchers made every reasonable effort to remain in contact with ɜt wave respondents and to track down apparently "lost cases." Those efforts met th success. The retention, or response, rate of first wave participants in this third ıve study is 77.1 percent—very high for a study of this age population tracked over s number of years. The third wave cooperation rate of respondents contacted was a ɡh 87.7 percent. The refusal rate for the third wave survey was a low 6 percent. In ɔrt, the large majority of those who completed the first wave survey also completed e second wave survey and) the third wave survey, and a very large percentage of ɔse we contacted agreed to participate. The vast majority of the first wave survey ıo are not represented in the third wave study were cases that were "lost" between ·veys, due mostly to their moving and not sending new contact information to the dy tracking supervisors, with the result that they were not able to track these first ve participants down.

Actually, however, more important than the calculated third wave refusal, cooption, and response (attrition) rates is of whether any possible nonresponse bias ɔresent in the third wave NSYR data. The issue here is whether those first wave pondents who did not complete the third wave survey (i.e., nonresponders) are nificantly different from those who did complete it. If they were different, then third wave data would be biased in the direction of characteristics of those who re disproportionately likely to have completed the survey. If, for example, white or ıthern or wealthy youth were more likely to complete the third wave survey, then t survey's data would be biased toward answers that would be more likely to be en by whites or southerners or wealthy youth for questions on which their answers uld tend to differ. Fortunately, the third wave survey data contain no detectable ıresponse biases—as a result of many factors, including the rigorous contact and ɔking methods employed by the NSYR, the generally positive experience enjoyed respondents of previous NSYR survey waves (as reported to NSYR researchers many survey and interview respondents), the professional skills of the research vey calling center staff who conducted the surveys (the second and third waves of NSYR survey were conducted by the Odum Call Center of the Howard W. Odum ɔitute for Research in Social Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel

Hill, under the gifted leadership of Teresa Edwards, Michelle Temple, Thu-Mai Christian, and Terri Clark), and a reasonable incentive to participate (third wave survey respondents were paid $45 to complete the 52-minute, on average, telephone survey). As with the first wave of NSYR data, minor original disproportions have been statistically corrected by applying a weight variable that adjusts for slight sample differences in region and income. But analyses of the weighted third wave NSYR data, comparing them to known population characteristics represented in Census and other highly reliable datasets, show that the third wave NSYR survey data can be taken to be statistically representative of all American 18- to 23-year-olds who are not in prison, serving in the military, or otherwise institutionalized (see tables B.1–B.4); according to the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey, 1.59 percent of the total U.S. population who were between the ages of 18 and 24 in 2007 were incarcerated that year: specifically, 475,900 U.S. citizens between the ages of 18 and 24 were held in state or federal prisons or in local jails in 2007; see William Sabol and Heather Couture, *Prison Inmates at Midyear 2007: Bureau of Justice Statistics Bulletin,* U.S. Department of Justice, June 2007, table 9, p. 7. According to the Department of Defense Manpower Data Center 2006 report, 2.7 percent of the same 18- to 24-year-old population: specifically, 145,774 U.S. citizens between the ages of 18 and 24 were serving active military duty in that year; see U.S. Department of Defense, Defense Manpower Data Center, *Population Representation in the Military Services 2006* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2006). Furthermore—although stratified quota sampling were used to select the third wave interview respondents—the subsample of survey respondents with whom the 230 in-depth, personal interviews were conducted in 2008 proved to be essentially representative of the proportions found in the general population on a set of key demographic variables (see table B.5). That means, in short, that the statistical and interview evidence presented in this book can be assumed with high confidence to accurately represent the entire U.S. emerging adult population about which it intends to speak. Stated even more simply, we can be very confident on social scientific grounds that the evidence on which this book is based is solid and valid for authorizing the kind of findings and conclusions that we present in this book. Methodologically, the data are sound.

For another longitudinal study of religion over the life course, see Michele Dillon and Paul Wink, *In the Course of a Lifetime: Tracing Religious Belief, Practice, and Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

8. Many major extant scholarly works on emerging adulthood pay relatively little sustained attention to the religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults: for example, Richard Settersten, Frank Furstenberg, and Rubén Rumbaut, eds., *On the Frontiers of Adulthood* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Jeffrey Arnett and Jennifer Tanner, eds., *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the Twenty-first Century* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2005); Jeffrey Arnett, *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood: A Cultural Approach* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2007). One major work on difficulties and solutions during emerging adulthood for socially vulnerable populations appears to make no mention of religion at all: D. Wayne Osgood, E. Michael Foster, Constance Flanagan, and Gretchen Ruth, *On Your Own without a Net: The Transition to Adulthood for Vulnerable Populations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

9. We will also suggest later that some of the findings provide a corrective to some alarmist and (we think) inaccurate views on these matters by some authors who stress the deep-seated alienation of most emerging adults from mainstream American religion, particularly Christianity, including, for instance, David Kinnaman and Gabe

Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Thinks about Christianity...and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), and Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007).

10. This study benefits from and builds on a number of other very good, prior research projects on the religion of American youth—including Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Tim Clydesdale, *The First Year Out: Understanding American Teens after High School* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Richard Flory and Donald Miller, *Finding Faith: The Spiritual Quest of the Post-boomer Generation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007); for a view from the British context, see Sara Savage, Sylvia Collins-Mayo, Bob Mayo, and Graham Cray, *Making Sense of Generation Y: The World View of 15- to 25-Year-Olds* (London: Church House, 2006); and from an Australian context, see Michael Mason, Ruth Webber, and Andrew Singleton, *The Spirit of Generation Y: Young People's Spirituality in a Changing Australia* (Mulgrave, Victoria, Australia: John Garratt, 2008). But this book is also unique in certain important ways. The combination of first, the national scope of its research; second, its mixing of survey and interview methods for data gathering; and third, the longitudinal nature of the data collection, which has tracked and studied the same respondents over time in order to follow developmental changes in their lives, together make this study distinctive. Some prior studies of emerging adults offer depth and insight of analysis but are not based on nationally representative samples and so leave one unsure about to whom their findings can actually be generalized. Other previous studies are based on solid, nationally representative survey data but lack in-depth interviews to help contextualize and interpret the meaning of their numbers. That, we think, is a drawback. Still other previous studies nicely combine both survey and interview data but are limited to cross-sectional evidence—data collected at only one point in time—restricting their ability to speak to the ways characteristics, influences, and outcomes may change developmentally over time. All of these prior studies are valuable in different ways. But this book's contribution to the conversation combines many strengths that together make it distinctive—a study we hope will greatly enhance readers' knowledge and understanding of the issue in question. For other related studies, see Search Institute, *With Their Own Voices: A Global Exploration of How Today's Young People Experience and Think about Spiritual Development* (Minneapolis: Search Institute Center for Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence, 2008).

11. This and the following three paragraphs are revised versions of part of a book review, Christian Smith, "Getting a Life: The Challenge of Emerging Adulthood," *Books and Culture*, November–December 2007, 10–13.

12. Jeffrey Arnett, "Emerging Adulthood: Understanding the New Way of Coming of Age," in Arnett and Tanner, *Emerging Adults in America*, 5.

13. Note that some of the statistics about emerging adulthood today are not historically unique. For example, young Americans in the nineteenth and very early twentieth centuries, when society was more rural and agricultural, also married later in life than they did in the 1950s. But changes in the larger culture and social order in late twentieth-century America make the experience of emerging adulthood today very different from the young adulthood of a century ago. Today's unprecedented freedom and mobility, available lifestyle options, and greater influence of secular culture make the years between 18 and 30 less orderly and in various ways more risky for most.

14. Robert Schoeni and Karen Ross, "Material Assistance from Families during the Transition to Adulthood," in Settersten et al., *On the Frontiers of Adulthood*, 396–416.

15. Jeffrey Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

16. The NSYR is continuing work toward a fourth wave of data collection in the future, which, if all goes well, will produce empirical data-based answers to the question about the religious and spiritual lives of 24- to 29-year-olds—time will tell.

CHAPTER 1

1. Chapter 2 explains the complex meanings of the phrase "hooking-up."

2. In chapter 6, we lay out a typology of six major categories of emerging adults' orientations to religion and spirituality. Among the typology's categories, Brad is a clear instance of what we call a Selective Adherent. He is religious but picks and chooses what he wants to believe and practice. The Selective Adherent type represents about 30 percent of the emerging adult population. By comparison, June belongs to the religious type we call the Religiously Disconnected. The structures of her life and experience have simply exposed her to almost no religion, and so she knows or cares about religion very little. On the interviews, we estimate that the Religiously Disconnected represent no more than 5 percent of American emerging adults. Finally, Amanda is what we call a Committed Traditionalist. This type of emerging adult has a strong religious faith that matters to him or her a lot—usually of a traditional or conservative sort. Committed Traditionalists know what they believe, are committed to living consistent and faithful lives, and so practice their faith fairly regularly. They comprise about 15 percent of the U.S. emerging adult population. In addition to these three types, our typology categorizes other emerging adults as Spiritually Open, Religiously Indifferent, and Irreligious. We will have more to say about them in chapter 6.

CHAPTER 2

1. Ron Rindfuss, "The Young Adult Years: Diversity, Structural Change, and Fertility," *Demography* 28(4) (1991): 493–512.

2. See Jeffrey Arnett, "Learning to Stand Alone: The Contemporary Transition to Adulthood in Cultural and Historical Context," *Human Development* 41 (1996): 295–315.

3. This is not a repeated case of others cited in this book, of romantic partners having sex with best girlfriends and boyfriends; each reference in this book is a unique case. Although survey and interview data do not provide systematic data on the subject, our impression from the interviews is that romantic partners sleeping with best friends is not a very rare occurrence among emerging adults.

4. In these pages, we sometimes refer to emerging adults not having the "ability" to see, think, or do certain things. By this we do *not* mean that individual emerging adults are somehow entirely personally responsible for their abilities and inabilities. As a sociologist, one is highly aware of the many ways that social institutions and structures powerfully shape all persons' lives—including the lives of emerging adults—in ways it seems that they themselves often cannot see. What follows here in the text should be read in the light of this basic sociological insight: that emerging adults, while clearly exercising personal agency in the formation of their own lives, also always do so in the context of powerful social institutions and structures that profoundly shape

CHAPTER 10

1. Tobin Belzer, Richard Flory, and Nadia Roumani, "Illuminating the Black Hole: Successful Programs for Young Adults in Four Religious Traditions," paper presented at conference entitled "Faith, Fear, and Indifference: Constructing Religious Identity in the Next Generation," University of Southern California, Los Angeles, October 11, 2004; Jack Miles, "Closing the Gap on Believers," community brief, *Jewish Journal*, November 4, 2004, www.jewishjournal.com/community_briefs/article/losing_the_gap_on_believers_20041105/.

2. William Shakespeare, *The Tempest,* act 2, scene 1, lines 253–54, Antonio speaking.

3. They should be alerted to the greater complexities of the matter, however, by the fact that the actual message is usually more like "Get out of my life, but first could you drive me and Cheryl to the mall?" as per Anthony Wolf, *Get Out of My Life, but First Could You Drive Me and Cheryl to the Mall?—A Parent's Guide to the New Teenager* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2002).

4. In the Wave 1 interviews with 13- to 17-year-olds, at the end of the early section of questions about family relationships, respondents were asked this question: "If there was one thing that you could change about your family, what would it be?" One of the most common, if not *the* most common, among the variety of answers that teenagers offered was that they wished they were closer to their parents. They wanted to know their parents better, to hear more stories about their parents' pasts, to spend more time together and get along better. When then asked why they were not as close to their parents as they wished they were, they said they did not know, they didn't know how to do that, that their parents were busy, and they simply did not know how to make that happen. This was only one piece of a larger body of evidence that drove home to us the fact that very many adolescents not only objectively need strong connections to mature adults in their lives, but they actually themselves semiconsciously *want* those connections. However, give the culture's controlling stereotypes and myths about teenagers being "from another planet," and so on, and given the pervasive structural disconnection of adolescents from adult lives and schedules, teenagers simply have a hard time asking for that connection or knowing how to make it happen.

5. Also see Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

6. N. Jay Demerath, "Cultural Victory and Organizational Defeat in the Paradoxical Decline of Liberal Protestantism," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 34(4) (1995): 458–69; quotations that follow are from 459–60, 463. Also see John Murray Cuddihy, *No Offense: Civil Religion and Protestant Taste* (New York: Seabury, 1978).

7. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultural Despisers* (1893; repr., Whitefish, MN: Kessinger, 2008).

8. H. Richard Niebuhr, 1937, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper, 1937), 193.

9. Charles Sheldon, *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?* (London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent, 1897).

10. For a similar argument about unintended evangelical influences on the rise of supernatural interests in the general media, see Lynn Schofield Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

11. Dennis Hollinger, *Individualism and Social Ethics: An Evangelical Syncretism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983); Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); more generally, see Phillip Hammond, *Religion and Personal Autonomy* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992).

12. Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991).

13. This reflects the Reformation doctrine of the "perspicuity" of scripture.

14. Nathan Hatch, "*Sola Scriptura* and *Novus Ordo Seclorum*," in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 59–78.

15. Willard Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War, and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1983); Mark Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

16. Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).

17. Michael Young, *Bearing Witness against Sin: The Evangelical Birth of the American Social Movement*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

18. David Harrington Watt, *A Transforming Faith: Explorations of Twentieth-century American Evangelicalism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1991).

19. See Peter Sacks, *Generation X Goes to College; An Eye-opening Account of Teaching in Postmodern America* (Chicago: Open Court, 1996).