

Souls in Transition

Religious Characteristics of US Emerging Adults

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We recently offered an article dealing with experiences of effective youth ministries in parishes. (See the article "Establishing a Solid Parish Youth Effort" [here](#))

In follow up we read "[Souls in Transition](#)", a book that summarizes the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). A serious sociological study of the religious practices and beliefs of "Emerging Adults", the study tracks changes in beliefs and religious practices of study participants from their early teen years (ages 13-15) to the present (18 -23).

In our opinion the study findings are *important to youth leaders, church school teachers, parents, clergy, and parishioners*-- anyone who has the slightest role in forming children into active, serious Orthodox Christians.

Impact of Religion on "Life Outcomes" and Behaviors

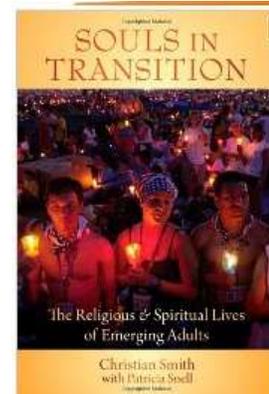
The study defines "religiousness" as: attendance at religious services; frequency of prayer, and stated importance of religious beliefs of study participants. It then uses this definition to explore the statistical relationship between those factors and other "life outcomes".

The study found a statistically significant correlation between the religious strength/devotion of emerging adults and various behaviors and qualities. Religiously devoted youth were found to be:

- More likely to volunteer & perform community service, and help homeless and needy than those religiously "disengaged". This, the study found, is in part because they are more likely to have friends who volunteer.
- Healthier and happier with their bodies, less likely to be sad or depressed, more likely to feel loved and accepted and to feel grateful more often.
- Better educated - more likely to have completed some college.
- Less promiscuous.
- Less likely to break moral rules 'if you can get away with it'.
- More active in general. The more religiously devoted average 2.4 "life/social/group activities" while "disengaged" study participants averaged 1.2. This held true even when religious activities were removed from the data.



Figure 1 Emerging adults meet at coffee hour



Summarizing the National Study of Youth & Religion-- useful insights for all

After cautioning readers about deducing too much with respect to this statistical correlation ("What is the cause and what is the effect?) the authors clearly state that in their professional opinion the study provides "very good reasons to believe that religion is itself one significant cause helping to produce these life outcomes."

Most Emerging Adults Stay the Same as Early Teen Years

What then causes emerging adults to be religiously devoted?

A commercial on television recently informed us that "90% of bone strength is developed before adulthood". So too with religious behavior of young adults. A key finding of the NSYR study is that the degree of "religiousness" of an early teenager (13-15) is a *significant predictor* of their religious behaviors as an emerging adult. (18-23).

In other words they generally don't change much.

- Over half of those studied remained statistically similar in religious behavior from age 13-15 to age 18-23.
- Of those indicating a change in religiousness more declined in religious behavior from early teens to emerging adulthood than increased.

In the words of the study authors:

"Religious commitments and orientations appear to be set early in life and follow a consistent trajectory from early formation through adolescence and emerging adulthood. For most (emerging adults), what happens religiously before the teenage years powerfully conditions what happens thereafter."

Parental/ Adult Influence is Critical

While multiple factors combine in various ways to predict religiousness the study identified a number of key factors driving religious behavior:

- Having highly religious parents
- Importance of faith as an early teen
- Frequency of personal prayer as an early teen
- Frequent religious service attendance as an early teen
- Not having friends and school mates who look down on religious beliefs
- Supportive religious adults (other than parents)
- Current congregation 'a good place to discuss religious issues'.

In the words of the study authors:

"It is a myth that as children enter adolescence that parents do not matter. Most parents have swallowed the 'parents are irrelevant' myth. Yet parents are hugely important. Peers are important but less important than parents. Parents, and other non-parental adults, know it or like it or not, are always socializing and teaching emerging adults about religion."

College No Longer the Culprit

Another study conclusion seems worthy of sharing. College does NOT corrode religious belief and practice as much as previously thought. Some quotes:

"The religiously undermining effect of higher education on recent youth has disappeared."

"Among recently surveyed college students 2.7 times as many report strengthening religious beliefs than weakening."

"If anything NOT attending college is associated with lower levels of religious practice."

"American higher education seems to have become an environment less corrosive than in the past."

One factor is growth of campus based religious and parachurch organizations "that provide alternative plausibility structures for sustaining religious faith and practice in college."

Parents, Church Schools, Supportive Parishes & OCF are Critical

So, in summary:

- Religiously oriented emerging adults are healthier, happier, more active.
- Parents matter a great deal.
- Other adults matter a great deal.
- Early formation (before teen years) is very important.
- Parish environments matter a great deal.
- College can possibly help religious formation.



Figure 2 "Religious orientations appear to be set early in life..."

While Orthodox participants in the study were, for the most part, statistically irrelevant the implications for Orthodox parishes are, we believe, important.

Consider the serious impact of these finding on youth programming, church school, parish attitudes and support, and in the establishment of OCF chapters on campuses!

Sunday of the Paralytic

Shortly after finishing the book we were present in a parish, on the Sunday of the Paralytic, where Fr. Thomas Hopko delivered the homily.

Fr. Thomas noted that...

...the lesson for the day tells us nothing about the faith of the paralytic. The healing is enabled by the faith of the people who dropped the paralytic through the roof. When Jesus saw their faith, He said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven you."

Noting also the many children in church that snowy day, he drew a parallel.

Someone brought these children to church today. They (the children) may have no faith but their parents brought them to church to see Jesus and learn about Jesus.

So who needs statistics? The lesson is before us.