

BOOK REVIEW

Featured Review Essay: Consistency, Change, and Context in *The Twentysomething Soul*

The Twentysomething Soul: Understanding the Religious and Secular Lives of American Young Adults, by TIM CLYDESDALE and KATHLEEN GARCES-FOLEY. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, 256 pp.; \$29.95 (paper).

Within the last decade, both young adults and religious disengagement have caught the attention of scholars as well as the general public. Trying to understand the choices of those coming into prolonged and gradual adulthood has been a puzzle for those whose experience was more scripted and abrupt. Conversations about Millennial and iGen Americans can quickly devolve into insulting stereotypes that do not take the social context of today's twentysomethings seriously. Additionally, both academics and the public have observed a rather sudden increase among those who claim no religious affiliation, or "Nones." The overrepresentation of Nones among younger adults has invited many questions concerning young adults and their religiosity more broadly.

From "The Changing Spirituality of Emerging Adults Project" led by the late Dean R. Hoge came the National Survey of American Twentysomethings (NSAT), which surveyed 1,880 young adults on items related to religion and spirituality. In *The Twentysomething Soul*, Drs. Tim Clydesdale and Kathleen Garces-Foley couple these data with findings from over 200 interviews with young adults and observations at congregations across the country, providing their readers

with a rich and thorough examination of faith and meaning among Americans in their twenties. The resulting book offers insights as to why some young adults engage religious institutions and others avoid them during their emerging adult years.

This book contributes to the field in a number of ways. First, it aims to speak to two audiences: scholars and those in ministry. Too often, academic books and articles are written in a way that makes them less available to those who work with the very populations under study. Clydesdale and Garces-Foley convey their findings in a way that is accessible to the general public without compromising scholarly integrity. Second, it nuances both the religious—Catholic, Mainline Protestant, and Evangelical—and the Nones. It is tempting (and easier) to treat four different religious groupings as four categories. However, by grouping the religious respondents into categories of Active, Nominal, and Estranged as well as the Nones into Unaffiliated Believers, Spiritual Eclectics, Philosophical Secularists, and Indifferent Secularists, the authors are able to illustrate both within and between-group differences in religiosity. Further, the outcomes of these various groups help demonstrate that spiritual beliefs and practices matter in a variety of measures of personal and social wellbeing. Third, *The Twentysomething Soul* contextualizes the ways young adults not only navigate religious institutions, but institutions more broadly, potentially expanding the relevance of the findings.

AUDIENCE

The *Twentysomething Soul* effectively contributes to conversations happening among both academics and ministers. Each chapter brings the findings to life through a brief introduction to some of the twentysomethings interviewed. The thoughtfulness and variety of experiences shared are likewise found in other story-centered works examining young adults and their experiences of religion (Day 2018; Oakes 2015). The descriptions of the featured congregations likewise would strike a familiar chord with readers who have visited various sorts of churches. Getting a sense of the people and communities behind the findings helps readers in more applied settings put the data to use in their own context. The authors also highlight four “strategies” twentysomethings take toward their faith: (1) prioritizing, (2) rejecting, (3) sidelining, and (4) eclectic spirituality. By identifying these, ministers can consider the ways they might better meet or adapt to the spiritual and existential needs of twentysomethings who adopt these strategies.

Sorted by the authors’ three Christian groupings, the book also describes what twentysomethings look for when selecting a church as well as what turns them off. Although there were unique aspects of church life that drew Catholics (community, spiritual experiences, and church leadership), Mainliners (radical inclusivity, good preaching, artistic worship, and the church’s vision) and Evangelicals (being guided there by God, teaching and preaching, authenticity, and race and ethnicity), the authors also found a common theme: that twentysomethings prefer to worship in congregations that have a critical mass of other twentysomethings.

This finding, however, may have been more of a methodological artifact than an accurate assessment of twentysomething preferences. Clydesdale and Garces-Foley found their congregations through word of mouth, internet searches, and site visits, selecting churches with “vibrant young

adult populations” (54). This leads to a bias among the interviewees for congregations that have a significant number of young adults, which may not characterize twentysomethings more broadly. The twentysomething perspective the reader misses is that of the scattered young adults—five in one congregation, a couple dozen in another—who may cumulatively significantly outnumber those in the twentysomething magnet congregations. These scattered twentysomethings do not need a critical mass of young adults to feel a sense of significance in their spiritual belonging. Therefore, the churches in the qualitative data do not completely reflect the survey population and cannot be said to wholly elaborate the themes found in their nationally representative survey (compare the mixed methods in *Souls in Transition*, Smith and Snell 2009). Rather, the qualitative and quantitative data should be treated as the study of two distinct twentysomething populations, those who seek a faith experience that is shared with other young adults and those more representative of the general population, respectively. There is nothing wrong with going to young-adult-friendly congregations for a purposive sample, but the findings this yields needs to be explained as not necessarily nationally representative as these young adults are probably more consciously choosing a twentysomething version of their faith tradition. The absence of a nationally representative perspective in the interviews, and its presence in the quantitative data, should be explained for readers.

The book does well in modeling for other scholars a genre of sociological writing that expands our audience and demonstrates the utility of our discipline. As Tricia Bruce (2019) noted in her Douglass lecture at the annual meeting of the Religious Research Association, too often sociologists are “quiet” about their findings, writing in such a way or for certain outlets that rarely find access to the public. We cannot write ourselves into irrelevance when so many of our findings have implications critical to a flourishing society. Clydesdale and Garces-Foley offer one way

we might increase the wider relevance and efficacy of our discipline.

ELABORATION, NUANCE, CONNECTIONS

The authors broke up their four religious types into separate chapters, giving those who minister to these groups easy access to the relevant data. Taking as an example the chapter on religion among twentysomething Catholics, I'll explore Clydesdale and Garces-Foley's work and the ways it contributes to that body of literature.

Work on twentysomething Catholics is a small but growing field. William D'Antonio and colleagues (2013) have surveyed American Catholics every six years since the 1980s. Their most recent book featured a chapter on Millennials (who mostly were twentysomethings in 2011 when the study took place). While the D'Antonio book provided many important findings, it did not parse the Millennials into low-, medium-, and high-commitment Catholics as it did for other populations; *The Twentysomething Soul* fills this gap, providing insight about the ways religiosity affects the twentysomething Catholic experience. Although Smith and colleagues (2014) found that many of the Catholics whose religiosity decreased had drifted or that religion became crowded out by other commitments, Clydesdale and Garces-Foley found that disaffiliation was more intentional. Understanding the factors that lead to a "drifting" or "intentional" framing of the disaffiliation experience as well as the long-term outcomes from the respective frames is an important agenda item for future research.

The book did much work in parsing out the degrees of commitment the religious survey respondents had toward their faith as well as the ways Nones approached questions of faith and meaning. This allowed us to discover patterns we otherwise would not have seen had the authors grouped their participants into only the four categories of Catholic, Mainline

Protestant, Evangelical, and None. Some of the findings were not surprising to those familiar with the topic, such as the Nones including those with religious beliefs (Putnam and Campbell 2012). Other findings helped illustrate the importance of religion in other social realms, such as finding that those "active" in their faith share more in common with each other than they do with their Nominal and Estranged counterparts. Similarly, using Pearce and Denton's (2011) measurements and categories of Abider, Adapter, Assenter, Avoider, and Atheist, the reader discovers that twentysomething Abiders report higher rates of voting, community engagement, having a sense of purpose and sensing an obligation to help others than do Atheists. Findings like these—that religion affects people and society in non-religious ways—demonstrates the value of the study of religion for those who are unaware.

Looking at declines in religiosity among twentysomethings, the authors claim that it is not so much a change among young adults as it is a lessening of external pressure to religiously affiliate. The religiously strong have been consistent in the ways they engage their faith. It is not that today's young adults are less religious than previous generations. Instead, previously those who were weakly religious still participated in a local congregation or claimed a religious identity because the social or familial cost was too high to do otherwise. However, those extrinsic costs are less palpable today, so only those who are intrinsically motivated to participate in religious institutions or personal practices will do so. Today's religious twentysomethings are a relatively stable population that prays regularly and holds conventional religious beliefs even while there is a growing minority of those who do not affiliate.

The finding I found the most interesting was the ways twentysomethings collectively embraced or eschewed what many tend to lump into two distinct categories: religion and spirituality. The authors found that the twentysomethings clustered nine items into two categories, yielding

"traditional spirituality" (e.g., frequent prayer, thinking about the meaning of life) and "nontraditional spirituality" (e.g., incorporating other religious traditions into one's own practices). Rather than finding that people believed these practices were mutually exclusive, they found that the most religious twentysomethings were more likely to embrace both kinds of spiritualities, and Nones did not resonate with more seeker-friendly words like "spirituality." This section demonstrates that Active twentysomethings utilize a much wider range of spiritual resources than one might suppose. While surprising, this finding was foreshadowed in Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton's *Soul Searching* (2009). Religiously active teens want to have a deep and personally meaningful spirituality in the context of organized religion. These twentysomethings likewise seek spiritual growth even while they feel a strong sense of belonging in their religious home.

BEYOND BELIEF

Finally, the authors encourage readers to see twentysomething individuals in a larger context, both more accurately situating this population and potentially broadening the significance of their work. By inviting the reader to see the ways the larger social world affects the spiritual choices of young adults, they demonstrate the important parallels in how twentysomethings approach their faith and how they engage other social arenas. This appears in the last of the book's seven "claims," which states that twentysomethings "experience the world less as sets of institutions prescribing standard life scripts and more as nodes on a network from which they can freely choose cultural symbols, strategies and interpretations. . . [twentysomethings are] practical and postmodern" (17–18). They find this is even more true among Nones and the religiously Estranged, whose tepidness toward religious institutions mirrors their wariness of all institutions. Here was a place where keen insights were raised, but

then not further developed. This discussion may have been perceived as a liability for a more public audience, but its omission is a missed opportunity to enhance the theoretical contributions of the book.

The authors also argue that it is a misconception that twentysomethings are wholly different from adult counterparts of other generations; today's twentysomethings simply navigate a very different world than young adults have previously. When a central argument is that these twentysomethings are similar in many ways to older Americans (it is the first of their seven claims), discussing generational similarities and differences among twentysomethings in light of other data would have been helpful. Although there is a section in which the authors helpfully compared twentysomethings to members of other generations when they were in their twenties, given the centrality of this finding for the authors, I would have liked for these comparisons to have been peppered throughout the findings.

Like all of us, the choices that twentysomethings make are shaped by their broader social world. Contrary to charges from both academic and popular outlets, Clydesdale and Garces-Foley argue that it is a misconception that twentysomethings are a lost generation comprised of individuals who refuse to grow up. Instead, the authors insist that twentysomethings are creative agents who navigate a reality that is different and less reliable than that of their parents; they make choices shaped by globalization, career uncertainty, family instability, and more. Twentysomethings' strategies of prioritizing, rejecting, sidelining, or innovating their faith make sense given their various personal and social contexts. Even amid the formidable challenges that young adults navigate, the finding that religious and many unaffiliated twentysomethings seek to create a "meaningful life by doing good" (11) is loaded with questions (e.g., what does a meaningful life entail?) for future research. The authors should be commended for findings like these, findings that prompt

more research on meaning, purpose, and prosocial behaviors.

To conclude, through its clear presentation of the findings and insightful analysis, this is a timely book that answers questions in both the public and academic minds. *The Twentysomething Soul* is an exciting new addition to the sociological literature on religion and young adults and is a must-read for those working in campus or young adult ministry.

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