

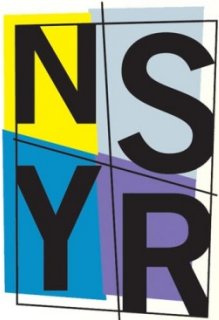
# Passing on the Faith in an Unsettled Culture: NSYR Findings about the Religious Lives of Emerging Adults

[www.youthandreligion.org](http://www.youthandreligion.org)

Christian Smith, Department of Sociology  
University of Notre Dame

Jan 23, 2010

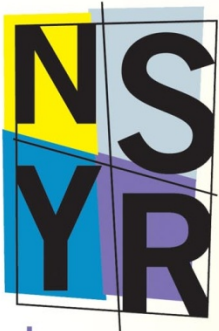
Reformed Institute of Metro Washington



## Purpose of my Talk:

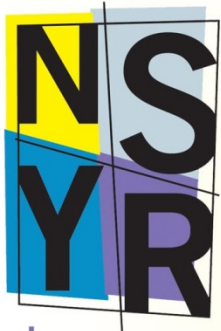
Describe research I have conducted on contemporary U.S. teenagers and emerging adults (NSYR)

Share research findings about emerging adult culture and religion with implications for Christian education



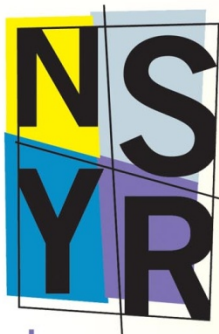
## Questions I Address Below:

1. What *is* emerging adulthood (EA)?
2. What are the features of the dominant **religious culture** among EAs?
3. What are the major **types** of EA relations to religion?
4. What **religious change** happens between the teen and AE years?
5. What **teen-year factors** most robustly **correlate** with stronger EA religious outcomes?



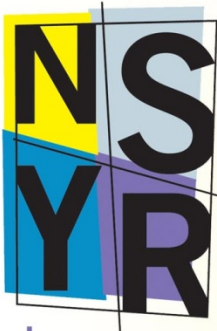
# The National Study of Youth and Religion is:

- The most extensive sociological research project on youth and religion ever undertaken
- Being conducted jointly at the University of Notre Dame and UNC Chapel Hill
- Under the direction of Dr. Christian Smith, professor in the Department of Sociology
- Funded by Lilly Endowment Inc.
- An 11+ year research project (2000-2013)



# National Telephone Surveys

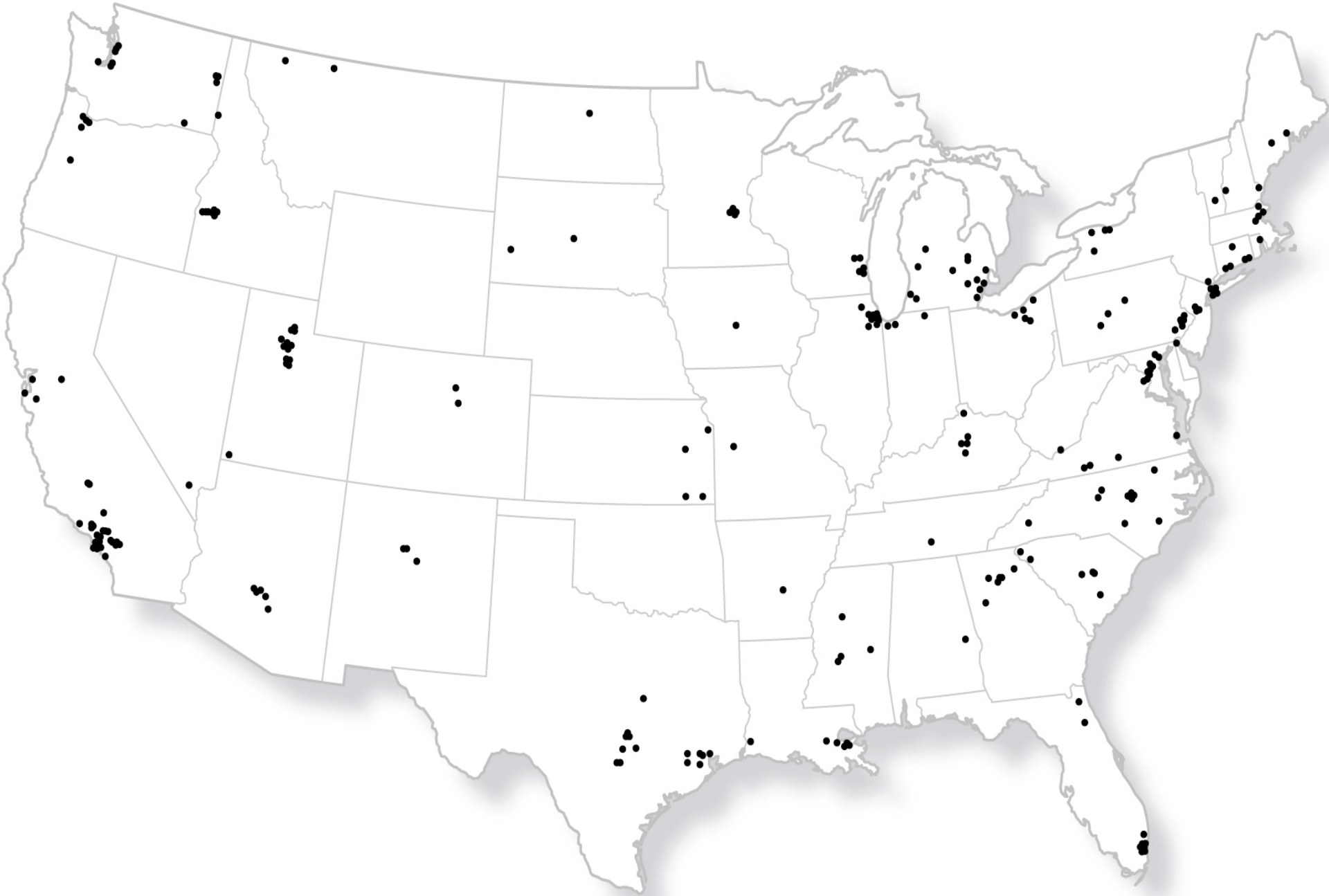
- Nationally representative telephone surveys of U.S. households with teenagers
- Wave 1 conducted 2002-2003
- 30-minute survey with one parent
- 52-minute survey with one 13-17 year old youth randomly chosen within the household
- 3,370 completed parent / teen pairs
- English and Spanish language versions
- Waves 2 & 3 conducted in 2005 and 2008 with same sample of youth
- Wave 4 funded for 2013

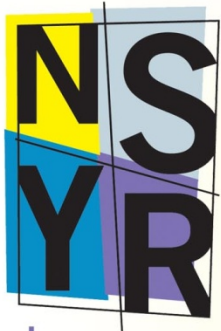


## In-Person Interviews

- Conducted in the summers of 2003, 2005, and 2008 with (mostly) the same youth
- Sampled from NSYR telephone survey respondents
- Follow-up, in-depth discussions about their religious, spiritual, family, and social lives
- 267 personal interviews with teens in wave 1, 230 conducted in wave 3
- Conducted in 45 states around the U.S.
- Interviews were on average about 2-4 hours long

# Wave 1 In-Person Teen Interview Locations

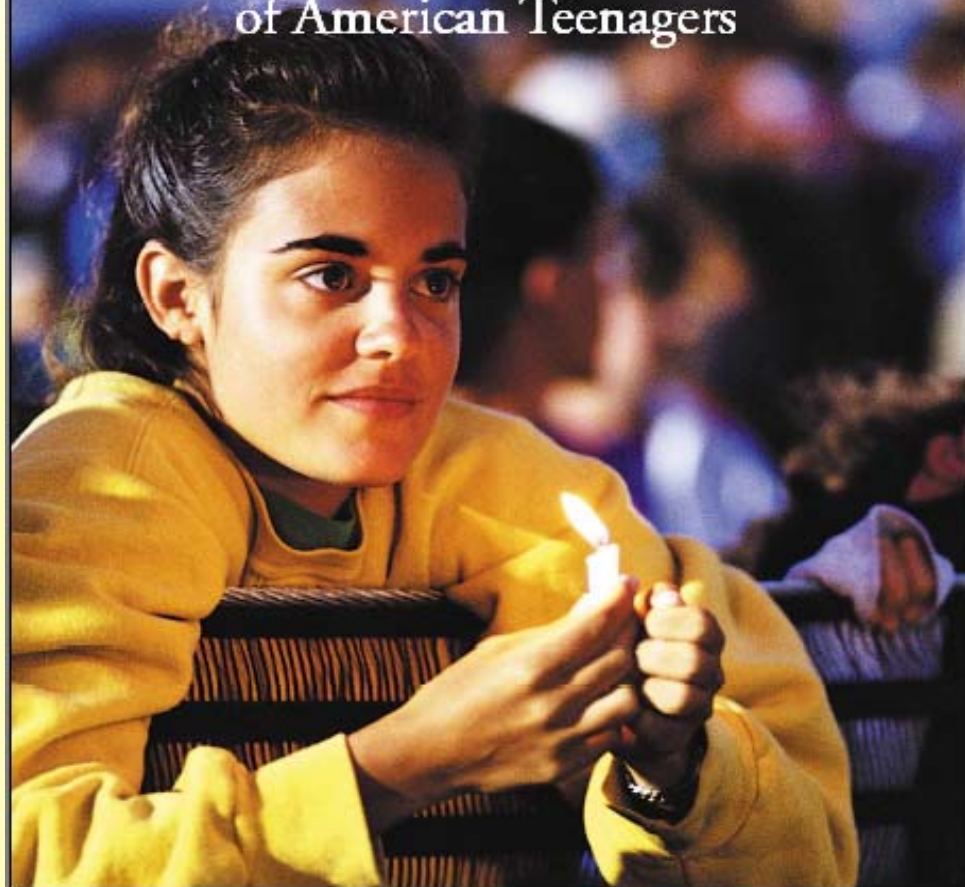




Big-picture  
results of  
Wave 1  
published in  
our first book  
on 13-17  
year-olds  
(OUP, 2005)

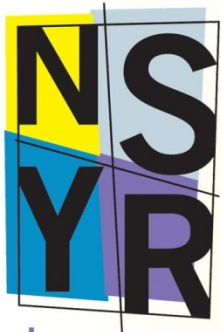
# SOUL SEARCHING

The Religious and Spiritual Lives  
of American Teenagers



Christian Smith  
with Melinda Lundquist Denton



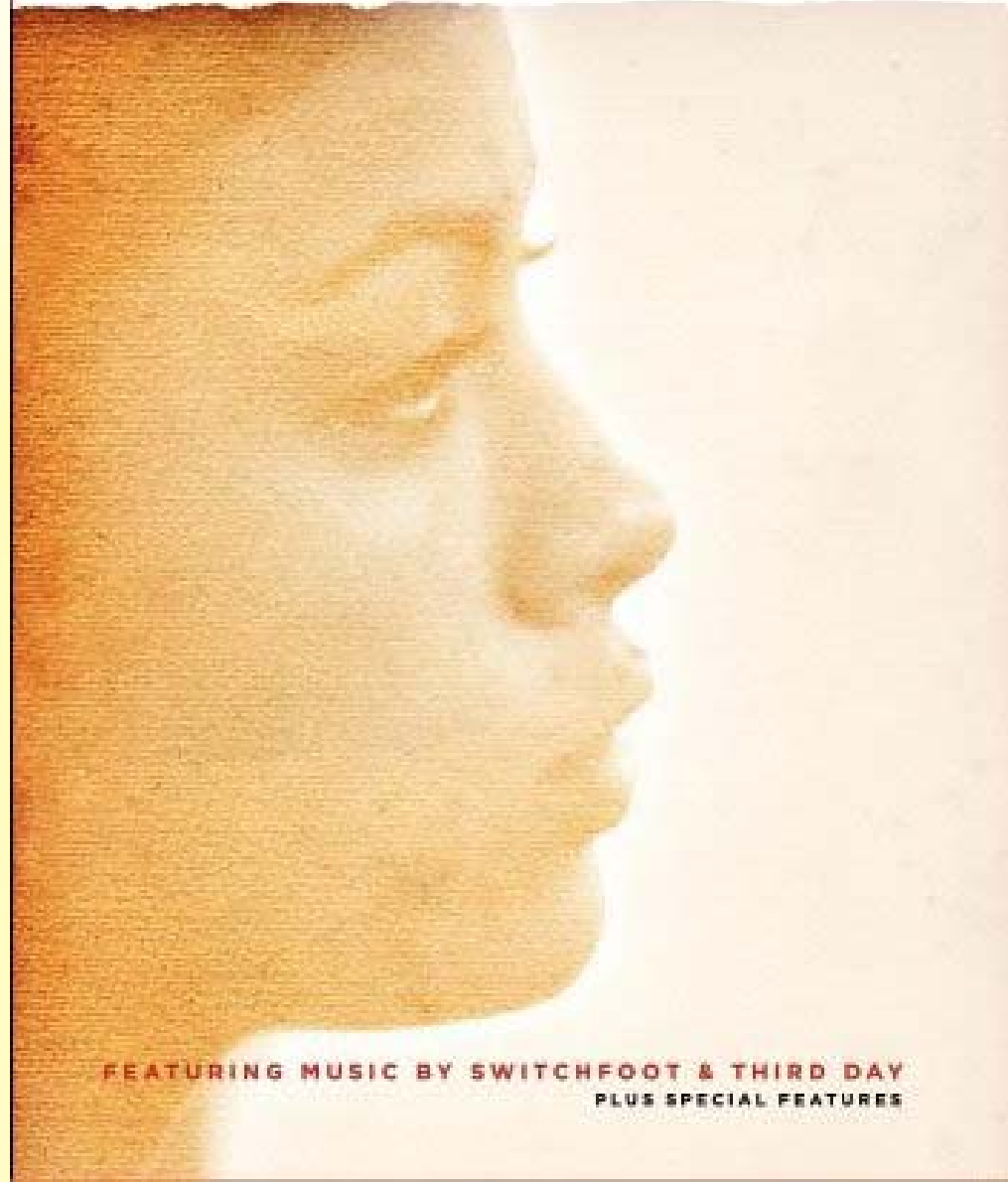


Also made a  
DVD  
documentary  
based on our  
Wave1  
findings,  
available on  
[Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com)

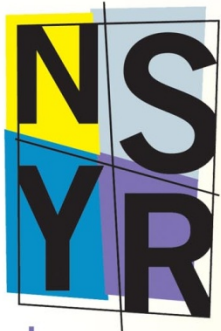
REVELATION STUDIOS PRESENTS

# SOUL SEARCHING

A MOVIE ABOUT TEENAGERS AND GOD

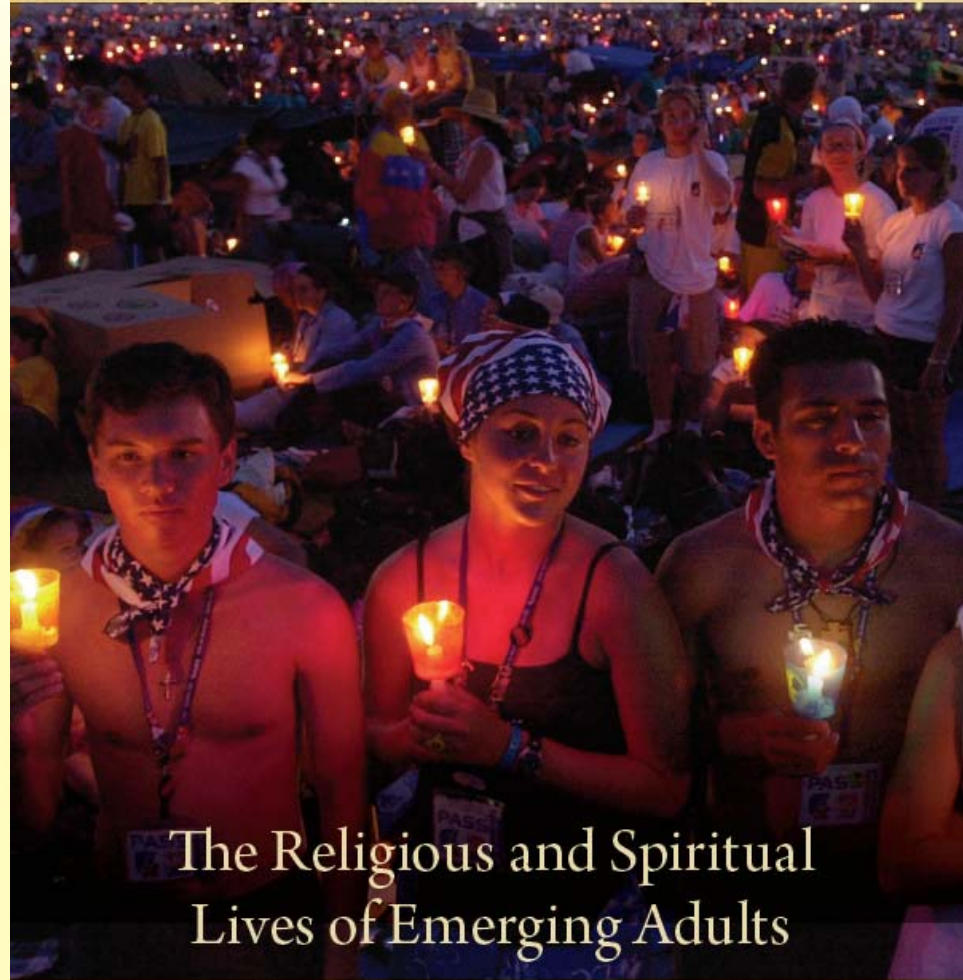


FEATURING MUSIC BY SWITCHFOOT & THIRD DAY  
PLUS SPECIAL FEATURES



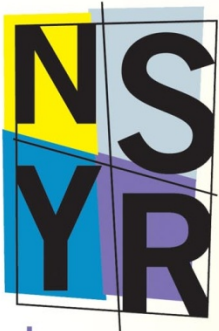
Big picture  
results of  
Wave3  
published in  
2009, on 18-  
23 year-olds

# SOULS IN TRANSITION



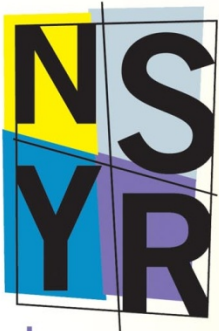
The Religious and Spiritual  
Lives of Emerging Adults

Christian Smith  
with Patricia Snell



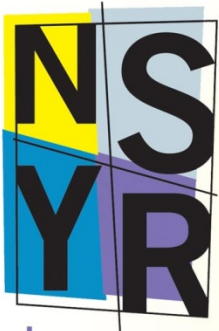
## → The Rise of Emerging Adulthood

- Expansion of higher education in latter 20<sup>th</sup> C
- Delayed age of first marriage and childbirth
- Macro-economic changes requiring flexibility and mobility
- Substantial parental support well into the 20s
- The Pill and other accessible contraceptives
- Cultural saturation of mass-consumer entertainment
- Influence of postmodern relativism and skepticism



## Result=Emerging Adulthood (EA)

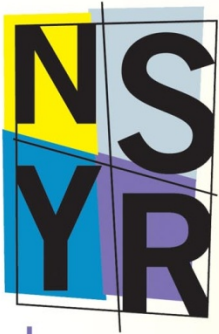
- Ages 18-29: a relatively new phase in the life course with own characteristic features
- Not merely an extension of the teenage years, nor the early stages of “real” adulthood
- More complex, disjointed, confused, unstable, compared to same ages in previous generations
- Extensive life transitions, identity exploration, instability, focus on self, feeling in limbo, and sense of vast opportunities and hope for personal life
- Also plenty of transience, confusion, anxiety, self-obsession, melodrama, conflict, disappointment, and sometimes emotional devastation



I am sure you already know:  
DC has a very high  
demographic concentration of  
emerging adults:  
always in top 5 “best cities”  
for young single professionals



→ What are the shape and texture of the dominant **religious culture** among EAs?



# Dominant Cultural Structures of EA Religion:

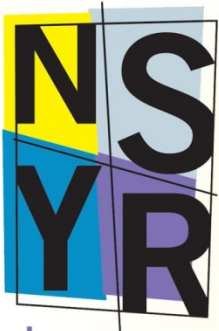
- Not a Very Threatening Topic
  - *Less Typical: “I Have No Idea”*
- Indifferent
- The Shared Central Principles of Religions are Good
- Religious Particularities are Peripheral
  - *Less Typical: “Actually, **my** Religion is True”*
- Religion is for Making Good People



## Cultural Structures, Continued:

- Religious Congregations are Elementary Schools of Morals
- Not a Place of Real Belonging
- Friends Hardly Talk about Religion
- Religious Beliefs are Cognitive Assents, not Life Drivers
- “What Seems Right to Me” is Authority





## Cultural Structures, Continued:

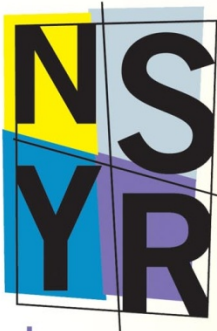
- Take or Leave What You Want
- Evidence and Proof Trump “Blind Faith”
  - *Less Typical: “I’m Open to Some Kind of Higher Power”*
- Mainstream Religion is Fine, Probably
  - *Less Typical: Mainstream Religion is a Problem*
  - *Less Typical: “Close to God”*
- Personal—not Social or Institutional
- No Way to Finally Know What’s True



## Some Illustrative Quotes for Flavor:

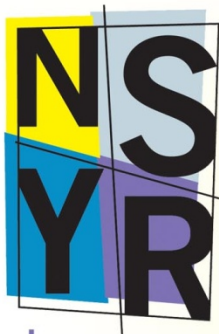
“I think religions all go to the same path, you know I think all religions are a way of how to live your life and they all kinda lead to the same goal—that’s how I believe in it.”

“I believe that if you do right, then you will have good consequences, you know what’s right and wrong. It’s the same in all the religions.”



## Some Illustrative Quotes:

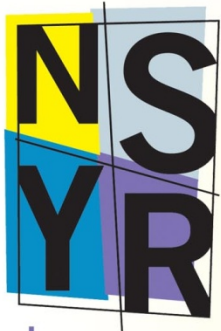
“I guess I am a religious person, but I’m not, like, dedicated. I don’t go to church every Sunday, read my Bible everyday. I think it’s more an inner than an outer thing. I think a lot people go to church and to be seen, so people in society are like, ‘Oh they are good people. They go to church.’ And I don’t want to be that person. I want to be a good person for me and for what I believe, so that I don’t think I take part in all the avenues of religion.”



## Some Illustrative Quotes for Flavor:

*Re Belonging:* “No, not a sense of belonging at mass. I do feel a childhood, I feel happy thoughts and I feel safe, like memories. But not belonging.”

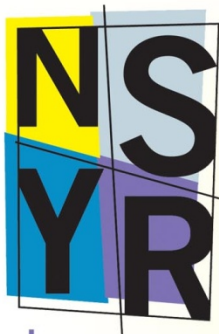
“I wouldn’t say belonging in the church I’m in now. I mean they’re Southern Baptist, but it’s run basically by really old people, basically conservative, wear a dress, wear a suit to church every Sunday kinda thing.”



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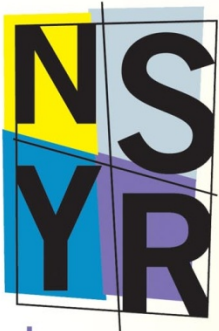
## Some Illustrative Quotes for Flavor:

*Re life choices:* “I don’t think it’s the basis of how I live, it’s just, I guess I’m just learning about my religion and my beliefs. But I still kinda retain my own decisions or at least a lot of it on situations I’ve had, and experiences.”



## Some Illustrative Quotes:

“I think that what you believe in depends on you. I don’t think I could say that Hinduism is wrong or Catholicism is wrong or being Episcopalian is wrong—I think it just depends on what you believe and what you’ve been brought up to believe. I don’t think that there’s a right and wrong.”



## Some Illustrative Quotes for Flavor:

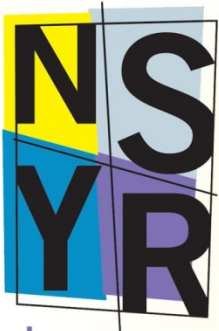
“I mean there is proven [scientific] fact and then there is what’s written in the Bible—and they don’t match up. So it’s kind of whatever you wanna believe: there’s fact and there’s a book, and some people just don’t wanna believe the truth.”



## Some Illustrative Quotes:

“I’m not atheist. I guess maybe that there’s something – maybe there’s God, I don’t know, I haven’t decided or fully thought about everything, haven’t come to that junction in my life. I guess there very well could be someone, something out there. Spiritually, I guess I believe in God. Maybe there’s something out there that is a higher being, or something like that. But I don’t have any direct, religious reason to believe in God.”



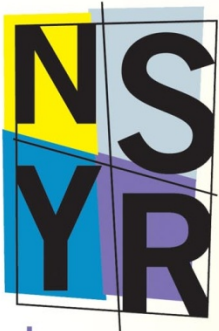


→ What are the major types of EA relations to religion?



## **Six Major Religious Types of EAs:**

1. Committed Traditionalists (15%)
2. Selective Adherents (30%)
3. Spiritually Open (15%)
4. Religiously Indifferent (25%)
5. Religiously Disconnected (5%)
6. Irreligious (10%)



# → What religious change happens between the teenage and AE years?

- This analysis focused on combination of:
  - Religious service attendance +
  - Importance of personal faith +
  - Frequency of prayer = one scale
- Focusing on 16-17 yr-olds, across 5 years

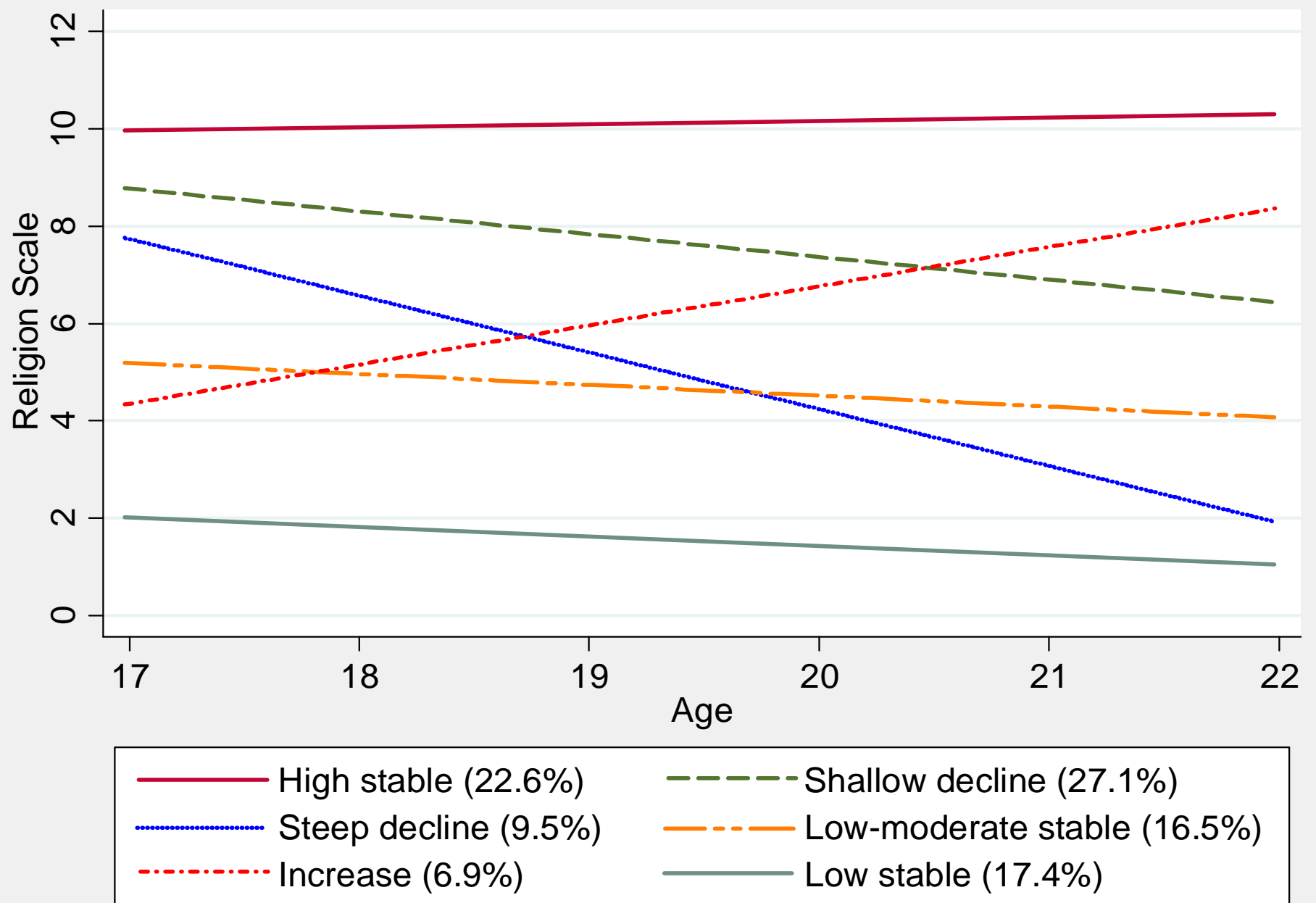
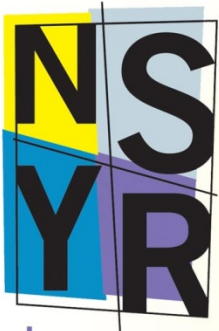


Figure 8.6. Growth Curves Tracking the Six Most Important Distinct Trajectories of Religious Change among Teenagers 16 and 17 Years Old in 2002



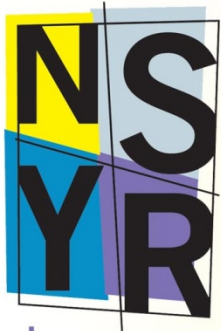
## Comparing Stability and Change:

- Religious **Stability** = the majority experience (57%)
- Religious **Decline** = more than one-third (37%)
- Religious **Increase** = a small minority (7%)



## The Bad News for Mainline Protestants:

- EAs raised MP have a statistically significant **LOWER** probability of being religiously committed/active at 18-23 than those who as teenagers were **not religious**.
- MP seems gifted at **inoculating** its youth **AGAINST** committed faith practice as 18-23 year-olds. (older??)



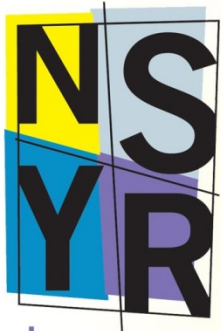
→ What **teenage-year** factors most robustly correlate with “stronger” EA religious outcomes?



## Consistently Important Factors During Teenage Years:

1. **Personal** faith commitment, devotion, experience  
- prayer, importance of faith, religious experiences, read scriptures, have few doubts, believe in miracles
2. Religiously committed and practicing **parents**
3. **Other supportive religious adults** (not parents) in congregation (youth ministers, mentors, friends)
4. **Sexual chastity** (behavioral)
5. Being **made fun of** by others for religious faith





## → Key Influence of Parents in Teenage Years for EA Outcomes:

### **Parents who attended religious services weekly+:**

- 70 percent high stable group
- 39 percent of steep decline
- 11 percent of low stable

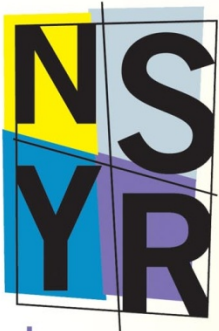
### **Parents who reported their faith to be “extremely important” in their lives:**

- 71 percent of high stable group
- 36 percent of steep decline
- 16 percent of low stable



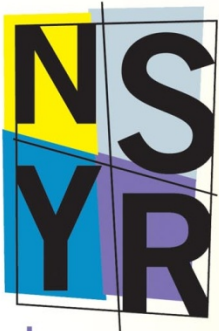
## Summary Reflections

1. Because of various massive socio-cultural changes in last 50 years, being an **18-29 year-old today** is a **quite different experience** than in the past:
  - more amorphous, complex, extended
  - transient, confused, disjointed
  - unstable, exploratory, anxious



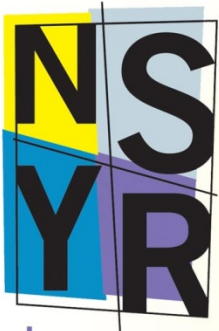
## Summary Reflections

2. Emerging Adulthood is culturally and structurally **not especially friendly** to traditional religious faith and practice:
  - sidelined, minimized, irrelevantized
  - moralized and simplified
  - homogenized, de-particularized
  - individualized, privatized, de-authorized



## Summary Reflections

3. Emerging adults include a wide range of **religious types** of qualitative difference, from Committed Traditionalists to the Religiously Disconnected and Irreligious, with various, non-linear cultural complexities in between.
  - **not** a simple liberal-conservative or high-low scale of “religiosity”



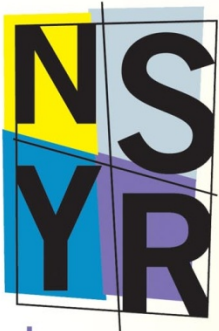
## Summary Reflections

4. More than a few EAs (Committed Traditionalists and some Selective Adherents) demonstrate that it is **entirely possible** to remain **serious about and committed to** one's religious faith and practice during the EA years—it is *not* hopeless or impossible or necessarily even rare.



## Summary Reflections

5. Still, the vast **majority** of EAs remains either highly **selectively involved** in or simply **unconcerned** about matters of religious faith and practice—either selectively defining it in their own terms, postponing it for when they are ready to “settle down,” or simply not caring or knowing about it at all.



## Summary Reflections

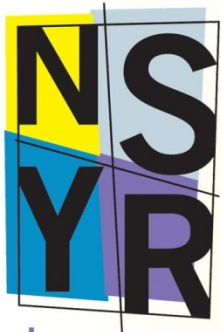
6. **Stability** rules: the majority of emerging adults (57%) remains at the **same level** of religiousness (attendance, importance, prayer) as during their teenage years.



## Summary Reflections

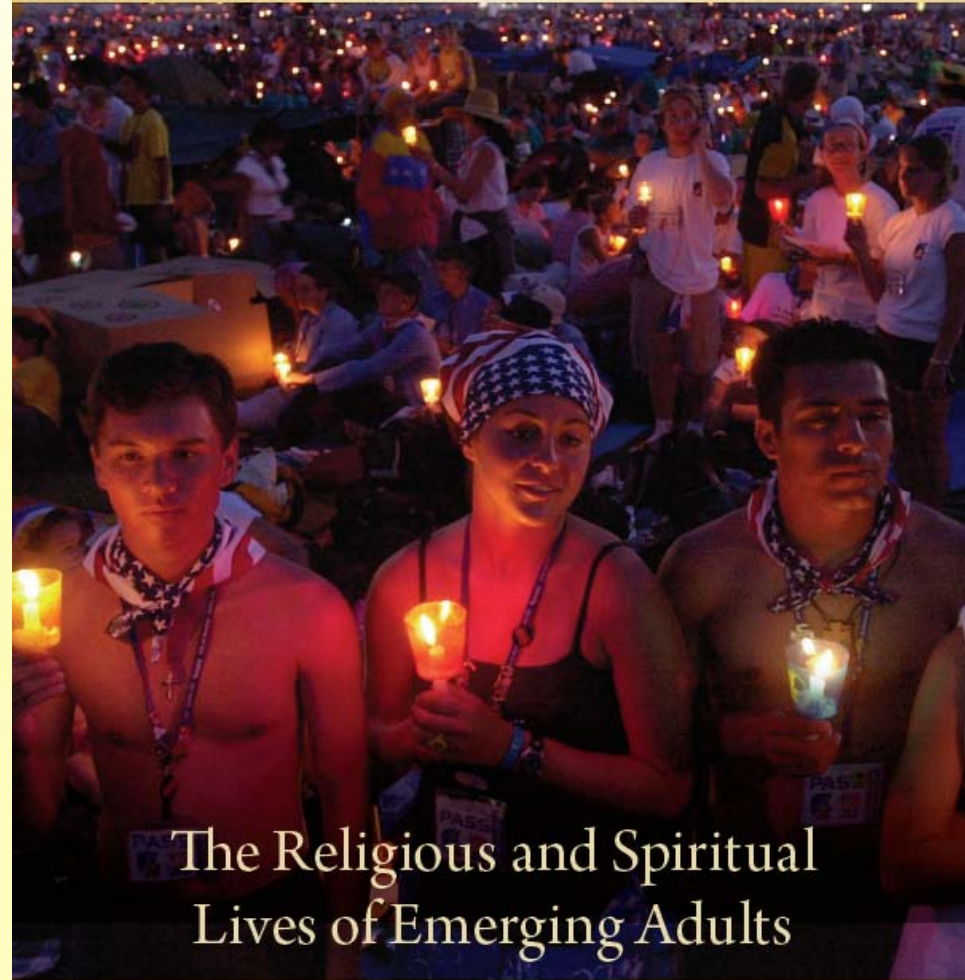
7. The most important teen-year factors sustaining strong religious faith and practice during emerging adulthood concern **important relationships and personal commitment/belief/practice**:
  - **parents!**
  - non-parental adults in congregations
  - personal beliefs, devotions, practices in younger years (usually formed by parents)





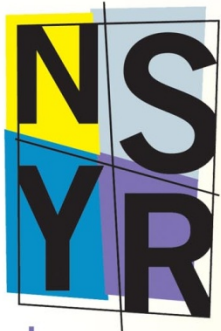
All this and  
much more in  
our recent  
book...

# SOULS IN TRANSITION



The Religious and Spiritual  
Lives of Emerging Adults

Christian Smith  
with Patricia Snell



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Questions?  
Clarifications?  
Discussion?

[www.youthandreligion.org](http://www.youthandreligion.org)