

PROTESTANTS IN THE U.S.: THE NEXT GENERATION

by Peter L. Benson

Young adults are dramatically altering American Protestantism. Although disaffiliation by young adults is relatively high in all faith traditions, it is particularly pronounced within those mainline denominations that have historically been at the center of American political and social life. This accounts, in part, for the fact that mainline Protestant denominations are graying faster than other denominations. For example, 36 percent of Episcopalians were fifty years of age or older in 1957; while 46 percent were fifty or older in 1983. Similar trends can be seen among Lutherans, Methodists, and Presbyterians.¹

New Values and Perspectives

This disaffiliation pattern is fueled by a set of values and perspectives which alter the rules of church joining and church participation. The rise of a new and contagious individualism during the 1960s and 1970s has led to both the questioning of traditional authority, including religious authority, and a growing interest in seeking personal fulfillment, at the expense of traditional institutional commitments. For some, the new individualism translates into breaking ties with any and all churches. For others, it promotes an openness to church shopping and/or switching, fed more by a need to meet personal objectives than to maintain a connection with family or ethnic religious heritage. For those young adults who do choose to remain connected to a religious tradition, the new cohort-related approaches to authority and individualism introduce into congregational life quite visible generational differences in religious ideology.

Among social scientists studying American religious life, these dynamics can be partially explained by "religious privatization," in which the cultural shift to individualism encourages personal needs and interests to shape religious commitment and ideology. As a corollary, religious insight becomes increasingly based on personal experience, and the church becomes more a means to meeting personal objectives. In this kind of religious climate, we would expect young adults to evidence softer bonds to institutionalized religion than do older cohorts.

A recent study by Search Institute, Minneapolis, documents these apparent shifts toward privatization. Representative national samples of adults in five mainline denominations—Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Church—were administered in-depth surveys

in 1988 and 1989.² Based on this study (n=3,144), a portrait of young Protestant adults, ages 20-29, can be drawn. Although the study provides one of the few sources of information available on young Protestant adults, it is important to note that the data presented here is on that slice of young adults who have elected to remain affiliated with a mainline church.

Religious Commitment

Table 1 contrasts six age groups on several measures of religious commitment, including acceptance of orthodox Christian sentiments, religious importance, and religious practice. The findings do not suggest conclusively that young adults stand apart in matters of commitment. On measures of religious importance, prayer, God, Jesus, and Bible-reading, 20-29 year olds evidence as much or more commitment than their 30-39 and 40-49 year old counterparts. Only on the question of life after death is there a clear difference between 20-29 year olds and all other age groups. If these data show any generational differences, they are most apparent between those adults over and under age 50 (on religious importance and prayer), or between those over and under 70 (on prayer, Bible-reading, and Jesus).

Religious Privatization

Although young adults are not particularly distinctive in basic religious commitment, they do depart significantly from other adults on the connection of faith to church and the larger world. Consistent with conceptual work on privatization, young adults tend more to make faith a personal affair, relatively divorced from denomination, congregation, and traditional religious authority.

Table 2 presents findings on multiple indicators of privatization. In all cases, young adults 20-29 exhibit greater privatization than all other age groups. They are the least likely to evidence loyalty to denomination or congregation, to view the church as the source of religious insight, and to acknowledge the authority of the church in matters of religious truth and doctrine. Of all of these differences, the most dramatic is on the question, "Spiritually, I gain more inside the church than outside of it."

Also consistent with the theory of privatization is the disconnection of faith from public affairs. Young adults are the least likely age group to report, "I try to apply my faith to political and social issues," and the least likely to embrace the notion that "Christians should be about the business of creating international understanding and harmony."

On political and social issues, young adults are no more conservative than their older counterparts. But when it comes to understanding the faith, they are the most likely to compartmentalize it, keeping it turned toward the self and away from the social and political arena. This may help to explain why disaffiliation among the young hits liberal Protestant churches the hardest, for it is this theological tradition that has most directly sought to connect faith to the public arena.

Private religion reflects, or perhaps even gives sanction to, a larger self-serving philosophy. There is some evidence, reflected in reported use of time, that young Protestant adults are the least likely to engage in action on behalf of others. For example, only 2 out of 10 of them say they donate time to help people "who are poor, hungry, sick, or unable to care for themselves." This is in contrast to 4 out of 10 for those 40-59 and 6 out of 10 for those 60 or older. But when it comes to frequent involvement in activities directed at self-improvement or personal growth, adults 20-29 win hands down, in comparison to all other age groups. Of course, it needs to be noted that young adults are usually more occupied than their elders with establishing themselves in their careers; this group has probably always given less time to charitable activities.

The themes of individualism and self-improvement also inform young adults' expectations of the church. The 20-29 cohort expresses relative disinterest in serving in leadership capacities, in participating in social service or social justice projects, or in learning about the history, doctrine, and theology of the church. Rather, this group seeks from the church the kind of spiritual guidance and interpersonal support that bolsters one's ability to function as a competent, moral being in a complex world.

Notes

¹ Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney (1987). *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future*. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press.

² Peter L. Benson and Carolyn Eklin (1990). *A National Study of Protestant Congregations: A Summary Report on Faith, Loyalty, and Congregational Life*. Minneapolis: Search Institute. All data cited are weighted to ensure that each denomination's contribution to the mainline portrait is proportional to its relative size among the five denominations.

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Table 1
Religious Commitment, by Age
(Members of Mainline Protestant Churches)

	Age					
	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70&over
How important is religious faith in your life?						
Percent very important	58	60	54	67	71	73
I am certain that God exists.						
Percent agree	91	96	94	95	92	93
My life is committed to Jesus Christ.						
Percent agree	78	69	69	76	78	88
I believe in life after death.						
Percent agree	69	80	83	86	75	82
How often do you pray, other than at church or before meals?						
Percent once a day or more	35	35	33	43	49	65
How often do you read the Bible when you are alone?						
Percent once a week or more	28	30	26	30	35	56

Table 2

**Inclinations to Religious Privatization, by Age
(Members of Mainline Protestant Churches)**

	20-29	30-39	40-49	Age 50-59	60-69	70&over
If you moved to another city, would you attend a church of the same denomination?						
Percent yes	74	87	82	78	91	94
If I had to change churches, I would feel a great sense of loss.						
Percent agree	67	76	65	74	82	85
Spiritually, I gain more inside the church than outside it.						
Percent agree	58	80	81	81	91	90
Which of these most helps you find meaning and purpose?						
Percent private religious experience	50	40	28	26	22	22
Percent my church	44	53	57	66	72	75
For me, religious insight comes more from my own personal experiences than what I learn through the teachings of the church.						
Percent agree	43	27	30	35	33	33
An individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any church.						
Percent agree	42	27	27	29	30	34
I try to apply my faith to political and social issues.						
Percent agree	33	45	46	47	60	63
Christians should be about the business of creating international understanding and harmony.						
Percent agree	53	74	80	80	84	91