

SOULS IN TRANSITION

The Religious and Spiritual
Lives of Emerging Adults

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Emerging Adult Religion in Life Course and Historical Perspective

THE PURPOSE OF THIS CHAPTER is to place the religious and spiritual lives of contemporary emerging adults in the historical context of the last quarter century and to compare them, in the area of religion, to older adults in more recent years. How different are emerging adults, to older adults from older adults today? How different are they from their age counterparts in previous decades? And how might those differences vary by religious tradition? These are the questions of life course and historical context that this brief chapter addresses.

AGE DIFFERENCES IN RELIGIOUSNESS

If one knew all about the religion and spirituality of emerging adults in the United States but knew nothing about how they compared to older adult Americans, one would lack a crucial sense of the extent to which they are different from or similar to people in other age groups. This section compares the religiousness of U.S. adults of different ages to see how they differ or not. The GSS data¹ collected between 1990 and 2006 have been pooled and the answers to questions about religion separated out by age. What is revealed is that emerging adults in the United States differ from older American adults on certain religious measures but not others. Figure 3.1 shows the ways religiousness varies by age among Americans for 1990–2006: younger adult Americans are less religious than older adults on these measures. The 42 percent of young adults who say that they pray daily or more often, for instance, is much lower

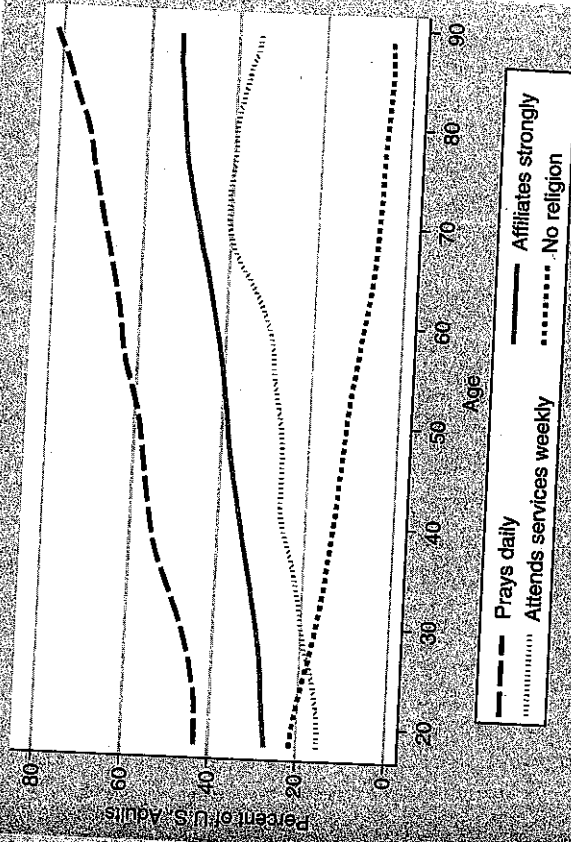


Figure 3.1. Changing Religious Indicators, by Age
Source: GSS 1990–2006.

than the 76 percent of those who are over 75 years old.² The percent who say they are “strong” adherents of their religion—as opposed to “somewhat strong,” “not very strong,” and “no religion”—steadily rises from a low of 27 percent among emerging adults to 53 percent among the oldest American adults. The percent of emerging adults who report attending religious services weekly or more often is 15 percent but rises to nearly 40 percent for older adults.³ And the percentage of emerging adults who identify as not religious—as opposed to belonging to any religion—stands at a high near 20 percent and declines among older American adults to a low below 10 percent among the oldest. In short, when it comes to prayer, strong affiliation, religious service attendance, and religious identity among American adults, emerging ones are much less religious than older ones.

But emerging adults are not consistently less religious or spiritual on all measures. Figure 3.2 shows that the levels of religiousness of nearly all age groups in the United States are similar. Nearly all American adults say they believe in life after death—as opposed to not believing—about 80 percent in every age group. The percent of emerging adults who report believing that the Bible is the Word of God and is to be interpreted literally is no lower than that of most U.S. adults of working age, and the percentage among retirement age adults expressing that belief increases no more than about 10 percent.⁴ Finally, the percentage of American adults who identify as religious liberals⁵ is

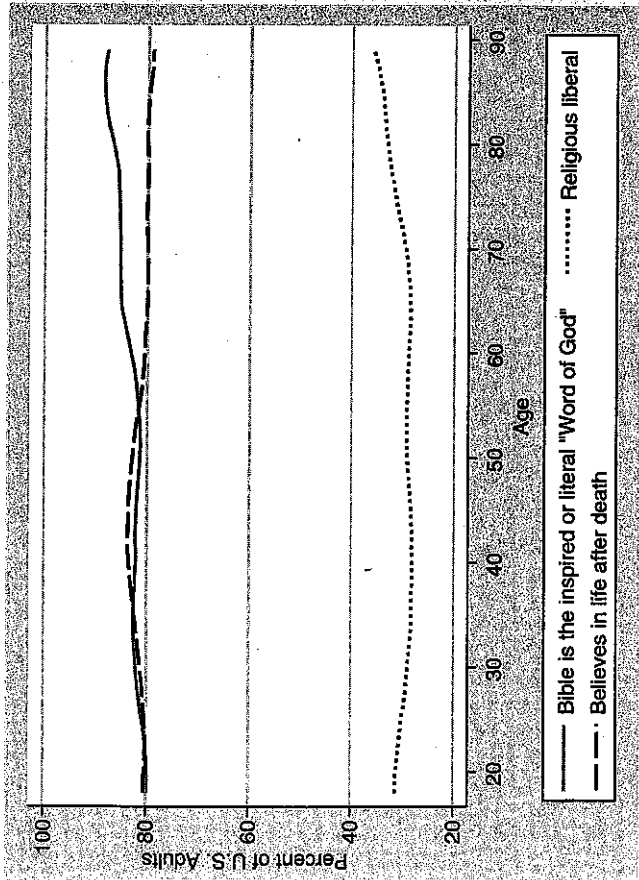


Figure 3.2. Stable Religious Indicators, by Age
Source: GSS 1990–2006.

fairly steady across all age groups. So emerging adults do not appear to have less belief than older adults in life after death or a literalistic view of the Bible. Nor do higher levels of religious liberalism appear among emerging adults. On these measures during these survey years (1990–2006), emerging adults looked similar to older adults. Whether emerging adults are less religious than older adults depends, therefore, on the religious measure in question.

The foregoing analyses of age differences focus on all Americans grouped together and then pulled apart by age. Interesting variations emerge, however, when Americans are disaggregated into different major religious groups. The survey sample does not contain enough members of minority religious groups—Jews, Mormons, Muslims, and the like—so the analysis here must focus on four major Christian groups: evangelical Protestant, mainline Protestant, black Protestant, and Catholic.⁶ Figure 3.3, for instance, shows differences in daily prayer by age, separating out these four major groups into different sloping lines.⁷ In daily prayer, roughly parallel upward trends appear moving from younger to older Americans. But the slopes and levels of the lines vary by religious tradition. The age differences in daily prayer among Catholics and mainline Protestants are much more dramatic than among evangelical Protestants and black Protestants. While the vast majority of the oldest Americans in all traditions tend to pray daily, only about 40 percent of Catholic and mainline Protestant emerging adults pray daily. Black Protestant

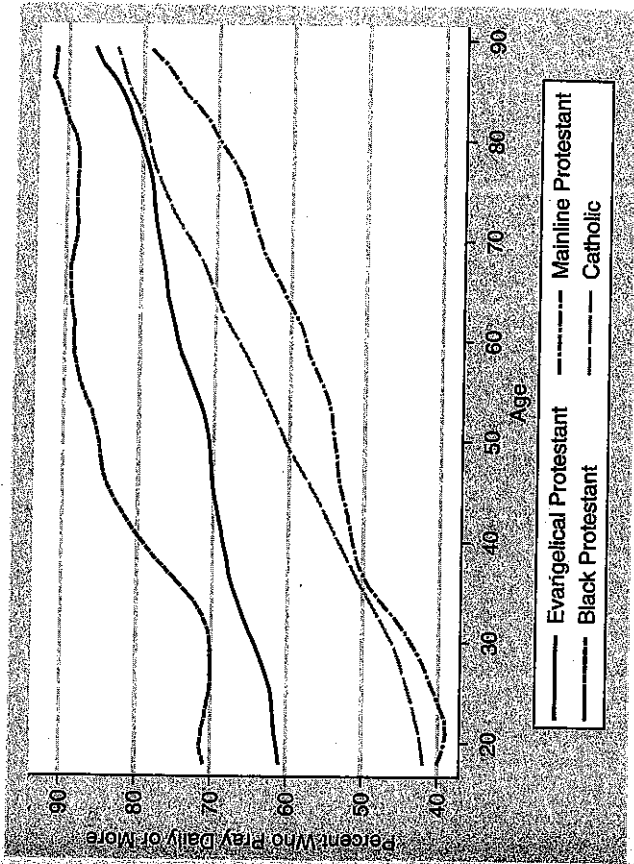


Figure 3.3. Percent Praying Daily or More, by Age and Religious Tradition
Source: GSS 1990–2006.

and evangelical Protestant emerging adults are much more likely to pray daily than their mainline and Catholic peers.

Figure 3.4 shows a similar pattern in “strong” affiliation with religious tradition. Among all four major faith traditions analyzed here, older members report stronger adherence than younger ones. But the gap in strength of affiliation between black Protestant and evangelical Protestant emerging adults, on the one hand, and Catholic and mainline Protestant emerging adults, on the other, is sizeable—roughly 20 percent. Whereas the oldest Catholics report stronger religious affiliations than the oldest evangelical Protestants, nearly 20 percent more emerging adult evangelical Protestants report “strong” affiliations than do emerging adult Catholics. Overall, American Catholics show the largest differences in strength of affiliation across age groups. (For similar figures showing similar results on age and faith tradition differences in religious service attendance, belief in life after death, and religious affiliation measures, see figs. A.1 and A.2.)

The findings reveal that American emerging adults⁸ in recent years are on many measures of religion less religious than older adults. Emerging adults are less likely than older adults to pray daily and attend religious services weekly. They affiliate with their faiths less strongly and are more likely to identify themselves as not religious. They are not, however, less likely than older adults to believe in life after death or hold literalistic views of the Bible, and they

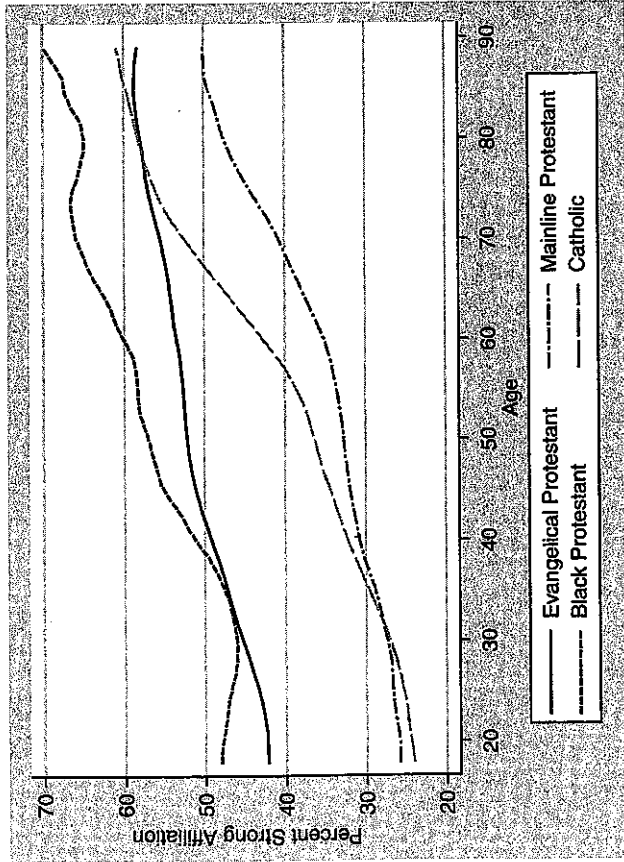


Figure 3.4. Percent Strongly Affiliating with Religious Tradition, by Age and Religious Tradition
Source: GSS 1990-2006.

are not more likely to be religiously liberal.⁹ Those differences vary by religious type, however. In general, evangelical Protestants and black Protestants exhibit higher levels of religiousness across all age groups than do Catholics and mainline Protestants. And the differences across age among mainline Protestants and sometimes especially Catholics tend to be relatively greater. Stated differently, Catholic and mainline Protestant emerging adults tend to be separated from older adults in their own religious traditions on most religion measures by wider percentage differences than are evangelical Protestants and black Protestants. In the coming chapters, we will examine social causal mechanisms that will help to explain why emerging adults generally tend to be significantly less religious than older adults in the United States.

Meanwhile, we need to register an important caveat that provides some helpful perspective here. Emerging adults are not only less *religiously* committed and involved than older adults but also tend to be less involved in and committed toward a wide variety of other, nonreligious social and institutional connections, associations, and activities. Emerging adults, for instance, belong to fewer voluntary associations, give less money in charitable donations, volunteer less, and read newspapers less than do older adults.¹⁰ Many of these age differences are represented in figures 3.5, 3.6, and 3.7. This information indicates that lower levels of religiousness among emerging adults in the United States do not entirely or even necessarily at all have to do with the

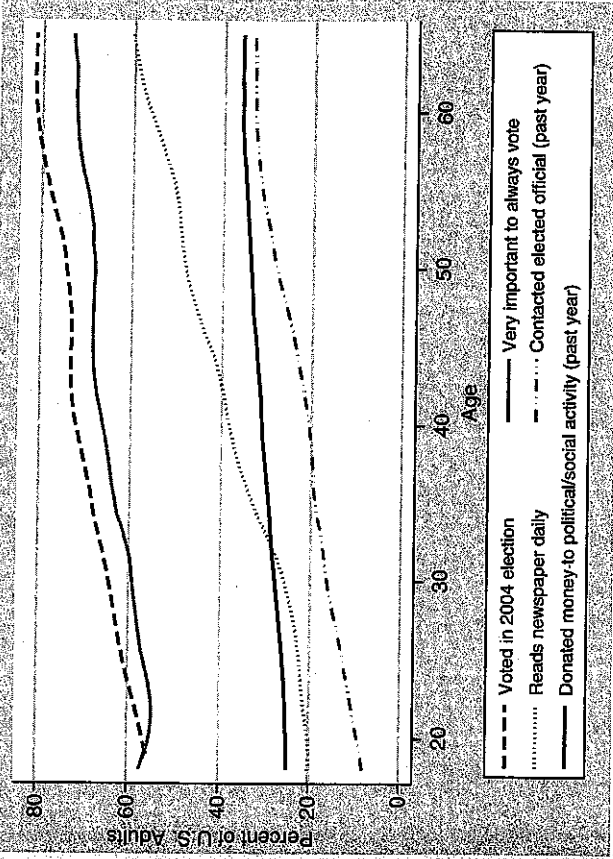


Figure 3.5. Political/Civic Activity by Age, Age 18-65
Source: GSS 1990-2006; GSS 2004; GSS 2006.

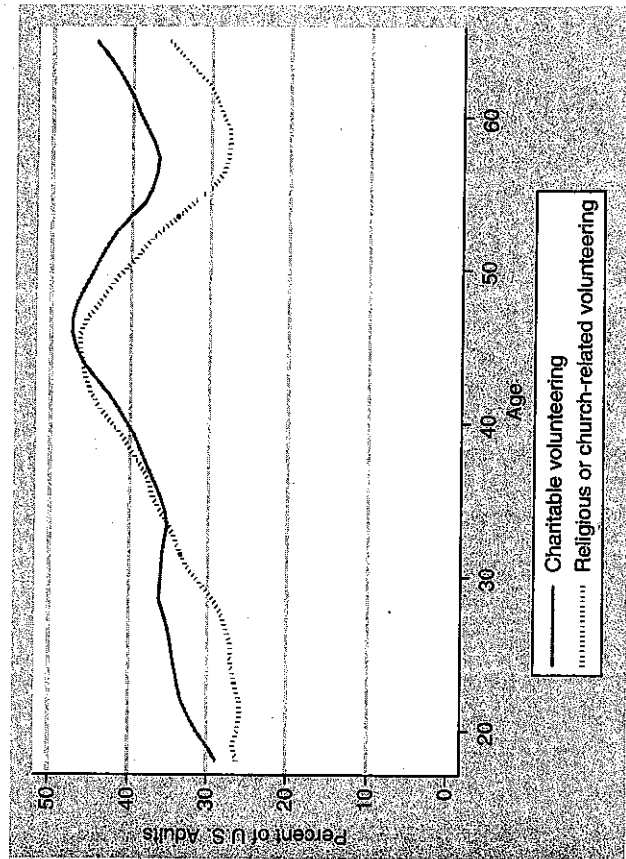


Figure 3.6. Volunteering Activity during Previous Year by Age, Age 18-65
Source: GSS 1998.

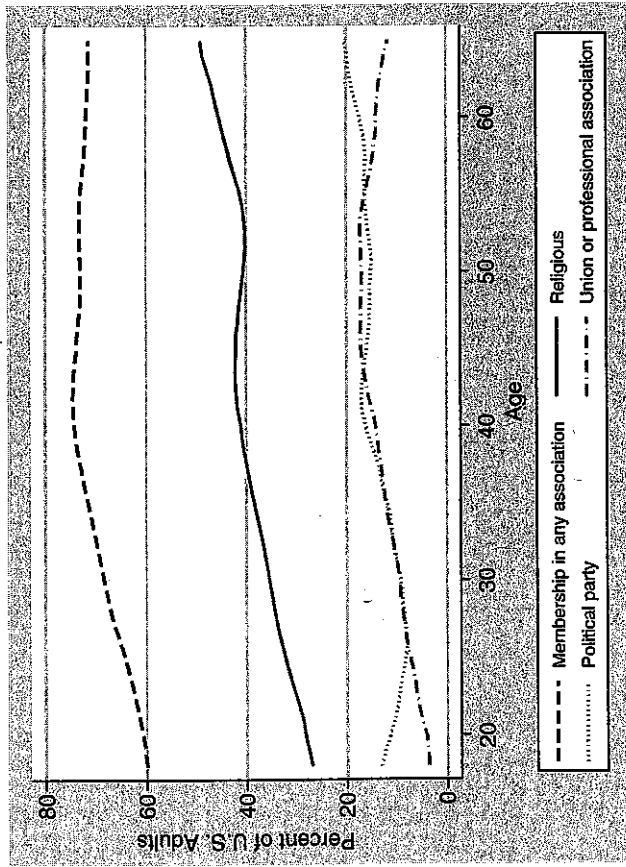


Figure 3.7. Active Association Membership by Age, Age 18-65

Source: GSS 2004.

religious nature of the beliefs and practices being investigated here. Emerging adults are not less interested and involved in religious matters only—they are relatively less interested and involved in a wide array of social associations and activities generally. Their relatively lower degrees of religiousness are only one part of a larger package of lower levels of social and institutional concerns and involvements generally.

HISTORICAL TRENDS IN RELIGIOUSNESS AMONG EMERGING ADULTS SINCE 1972

How religiously different, if at all, are American emerging adults today from their counterparts in previous decades? Have American emerging adults become more or less religious than those of prior generations? To answer these questions, we look next at 18-25 year old General Social Survey respondents, separated out by the year they completed the survey, from 1972 to 2006. Here again, some change and some stability appear. Figure 3.8 shows measures of religion on which emerging adults have changed some over the decades. A 12 percent increase appears, across 24 years, in the percentage of emerging adults who believe in life after death—growing from 72 percent in 1972-76 to 84 percent in 2004-6. Also apparent are a 12 percent growth in emerging adults identifying themselves religiously as liberal (from 23 percent in 1972-76 to 35 percent in 2004-6) and a 12 percent increase in the number of emerging adults

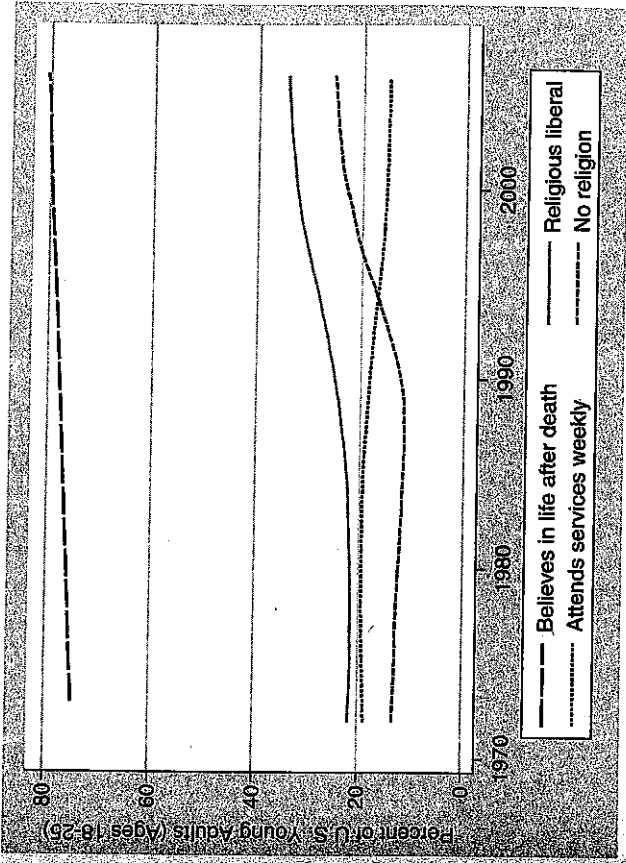


Figure 3.8. Changing Religious Indicators, by Year (Ages 18-25)

Source: GSS 1972-2006.

who say they have no religious affiliation (from 14 percent in 1972-76 to 26 percent in 2004-6). Finally, we note a slight decline in weekly or more frequent religious service attendance among emerging adults, dropping from 19 percent in 1972-76 to 15 percent in 2004-6. In these ways, emerging adults in the United States have become slightly less religious over the last quarter century.

As with the analysis across age groups in the prior section, however, emerging adults today appear no less religious than those of previous decades on at least some measures. Figure 3.9 shows that today's emerging adults are hardly different at all from those of prior decades when it comes to daily prayer, Bible beliefs, and strong religious affiliation.¹¹ Not much appears to have changed.

Next, as was done earlier, all emerging adults were disaggregated into the same four major Christian traditions, so as to study the religious differences across those groups for each year the survey was conducted. Pulling the religious groups apart this way reveals interesting differences between them in trends over time. Figure 3.10, for example, shows that changes in weekly or more frequent religious service attendance that appeared fairly stable across the decades for all groups combined (in figure 3.8) actually varied dramatically for emerging adults in different religious groups. Evangelical Protestant emerging adults in different years show a slight increase in regular church attendance between 1972 and 2006. Black Protestant emerging adults show a similar increase, though one starting from a lower baseline level. By contrast,

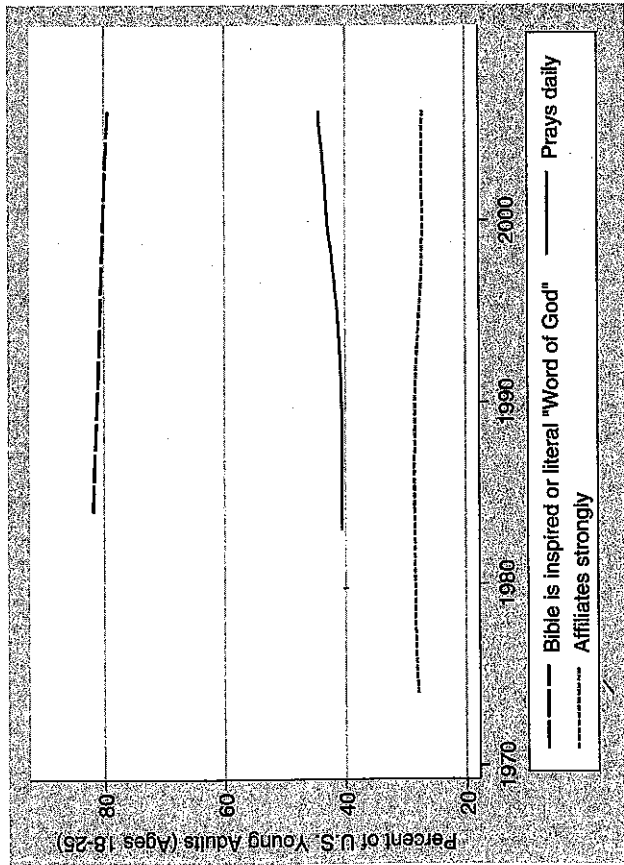


Figure 3.9. Stable Religious Indicators, by Year (Ages 18-25)
Source: GSS 1972-2006.

the percent of Catholic emerging adults attending church weekly or more often has declined by 10 percent over this 24-year period: from 25 percent in 1972-76 to just below 15 percent in 2004-6. The proportion of mainline Protestant emerging adults attend church weekly or more often has also declined, from nearly 15 percent in the early 1970s to below 10 percent by the year 2000. When all of these groups are merged together, as in figure 3.8, their differences cancel each other out, and their combined church attendance trend line remains stable. But when different religious groups are separated out, as here, real differences appear in the church attendance practices of their emerging adults over the decades.

Disaggregating emerging adults into different religious types reveals different trends for these persons over time on other religion measures. Figure 3.11, for instance, examines changes in emerging adults (ages 18 to 24) reporting a "strong" religious affiliation between 1972 and 2006. The percent of strongly affiliated black Protestant emerging adults increased by more than 10 percent during this time period, especially after 1995. The percent of "strong" evangelical Protestant emerging adults also increased, although not as much and starting from a slightly lower baseline. The percent of mainline Protestant emerging adults reporting a strong religious affiliation increased a few points during these years, although a 10-20 percent different remains between them and their black Protestant and evangelical Protestant counterparts. Catholic emerging adults reporting a strong Catholic affiliation, in contrast, decreased

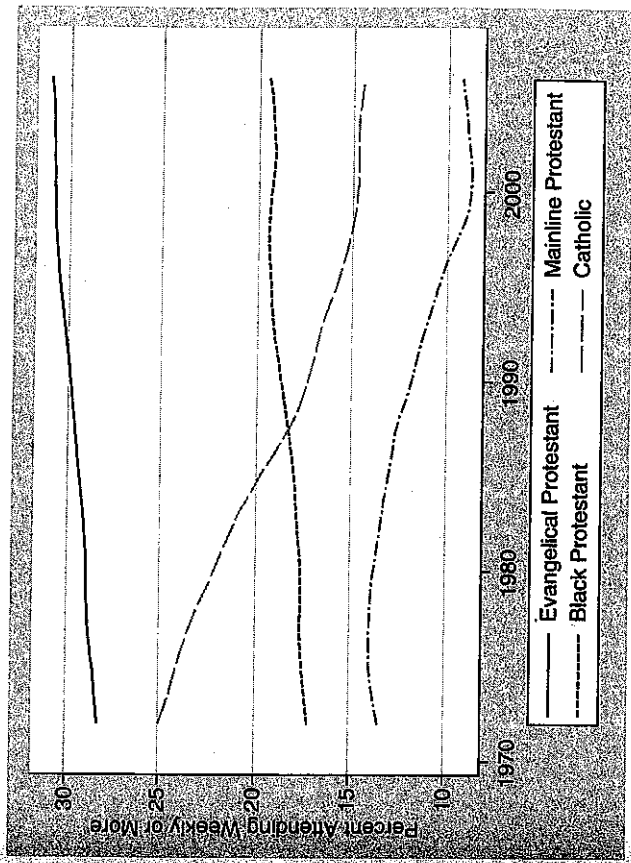


Figure 3.10. Percent of 18- to 25-year-olds Attending Religious Services Weekly or More, by Religious Tradition, 1972-2006
Source: GSS 1972-2006.

by a few percentage points. Again, it is evident that trends in the religious practices and identities of emerging adults over the last quarter century have varied significantly by religious tradition.

Two other religious belief measures viewed in historical perspective and disaggregated by religious tradition reveal interesting findings. First, with regard to emerging adults' beliefs about the Bible, we noted in figure 3.9 that over time they remained quite stable. But figure 3.12 shows that the levels of change in these views vary considerably with emerging adults' different religious traditions. The proportion of evangelical Protestant emerging adults who believe the Bible to be either the inspired or literal word of God increased about 5 percent between 1972 and 2006. Black Protestant emerging adults increased more dramatically during the same time period in this regard, gaining nearly 15 percent—such that they started well below the level of evangelicals in 1972 and ended up above evangelicals in 2006. By contrast, the percents of Catholic and mainline Protestant emerging adults who hold these beliefs remained stable between 1972 and 2006, ending up about 10 percent lower than the percents of evangelical Protestants and black Protestants.

Finally, figure 3.13 shows that the levels of change in emerging adults' belief in life after death vary in accordance with their different religious traditions. Evangelical Protestant and mainline Protestant emerging adults both show very slight but steady increases in belief in life after death at the high end

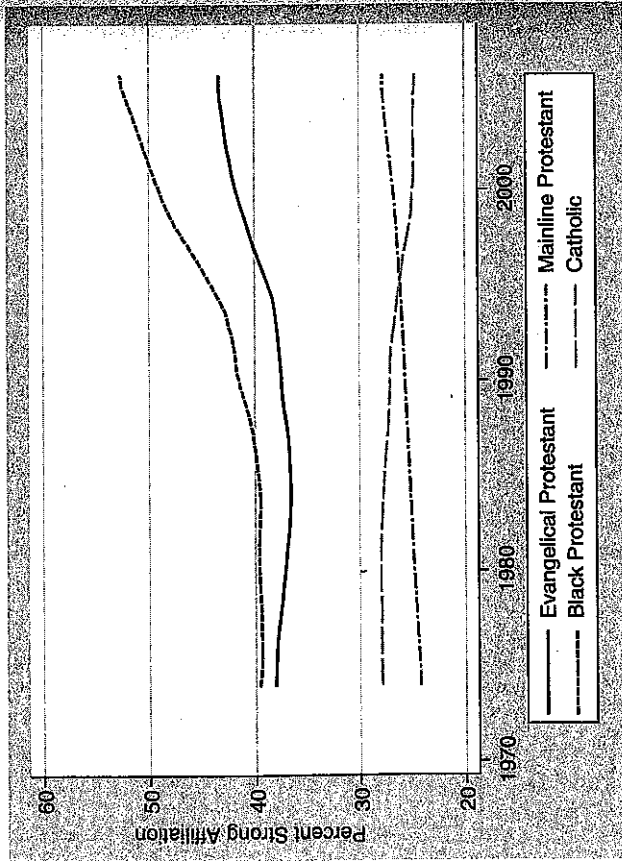


Figure 3.11. Percent of 18- to 25-year-olds Strongly Affiliating with Own Religious Tradition, by Religious Tradition, 1974-2006
Source: GSS 1974-2006.

of the mid-80 percents. Both Catholic and black Protestant emerging adults, by contrast, exhibit marked increases between 1972 and 2006 in their belief in life after death, each gaining significant percentages. (For a similar display of results for faith tradition differences in daily prayer by year of survey, see figure A.3.)

In addition, emerging adults were also disaggregated by gender (male, female), educational experience (at least some college, no college), and annual income (less than \$25,000, \$25,000-\$100,000, more than \$100,000), to enable examine of religious changes over time across these groups. The results (not shown) were unexceptional. Emerging adult men and women, for example, track each other closely in changes in religion between 1972 and 2006. Women are always about 5-10 percent higher on religion measures than men, but any changes over time generally happen in tandem. When the percent of emerging adult men reporting no religious affiliation rises in the late 1980s, the same happens for women at the same time and in the same proportion. The only religion measure examined here for which changes over time do not parallel for men and women is belief in life after death. There the overall slight increase is greater for men than for women—so that men, who started off believing in life after death less than women in 1972, changed at a greater rate and ended up by 2006 more likely than women to believe in life after death. Even so, the differences in changes there are not dramatic. The same

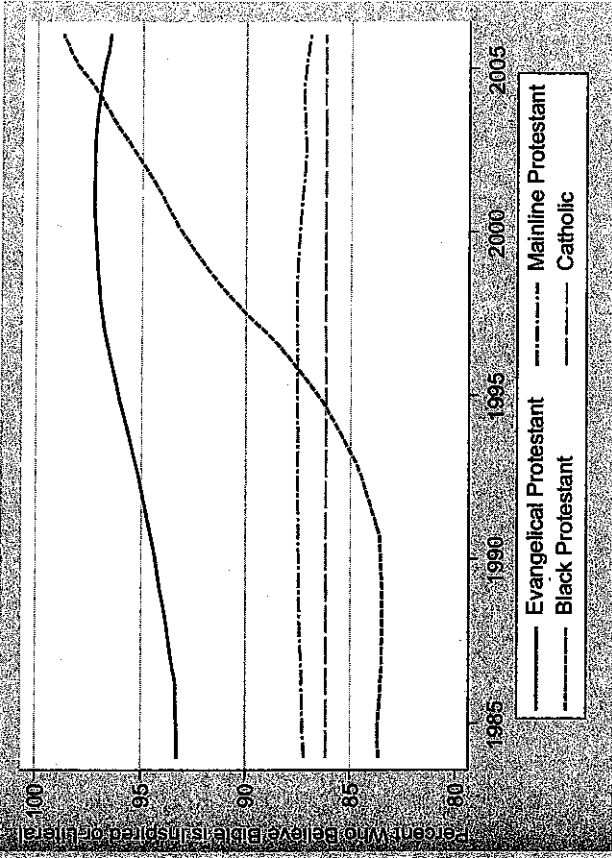


Figure 3.12. Percent of 18- to 25-year-olds Believing the Bible Is Inspired or Literal Word of God, by Religious Tradition, 1984-2006
Source: GSS 1984-2006.

general observation applies to differences in education and income. Emerging adults with some exposure to higher education score higher on all the religion measures except more traditional views of the Bible. But their trends in changes over time do not differ significantly from emerging adults not exposed to higher education. The same is true of trends among emerging adults in different income groups. When they differ, the lowest income group tends to be the least religious. But none of the income groups are dramatically different from the others in how they changed religiously between 1972 and 2006—any modest upward or downward trends tended to happen in all income groups similarly.¹²

This backward historical glance at the religiousness of emerging adults reveals that, on the whole, 18- to 24-year-old Americans have not since 1972 become dramatically less religious or more secular. When viewed as a single group, they have on most measures changed by only a few percentage points in either direction. On the one hand, the percent of emerging adults who pray at least daily and who believe in life after death has increased slightly. On the other hand, compared to prior decades, more emerging adults as a group today claim no religious affiliation, and somewhat fewer attend religious services weekly or more often. The percent of emerging adults who identify religiously as liberal has also grown since 1972. Yet emerging adults in America have not since 1972 significantly changed in their views on the Bible,

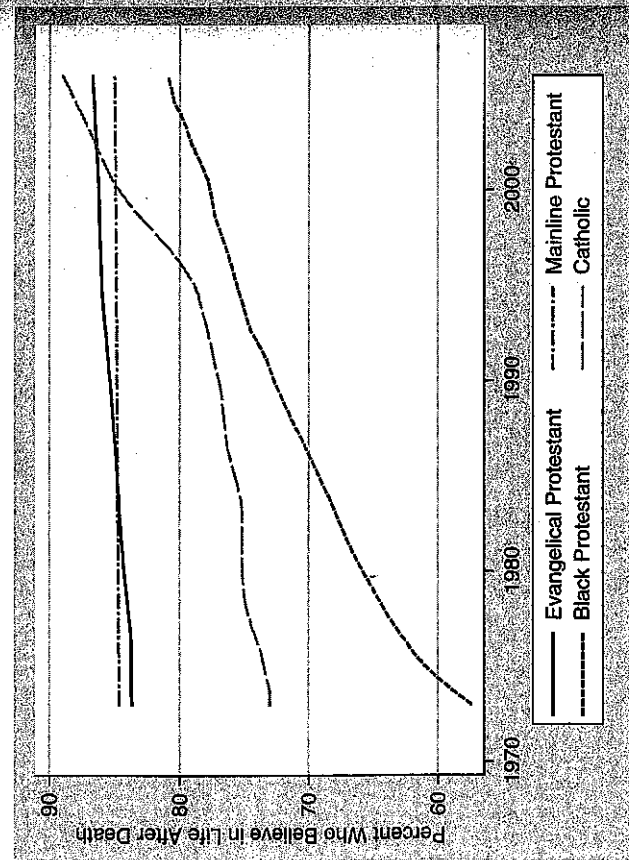


Figure 3.13. Percent of 18- to 25-year-olds Believing in Life after Death, by Religion, Tradition, 1973-2006
Source: GSS 1973-2006.

or declined in the percent who report being strongly affiliated with a religion. Of course, the very cultural meanings of terms such as “liberal,” “strong,” and even “religious” could have changed over recent decades, undermining the reliability of the meaning of these measures over time. Survey measures can only tell so much about qualitative change in cultural meanings and practices over time. At the very least, however, we can confidently say that it is difficult, based on these data, to conclude that emerging adults in the United States have as a group become less religious or more secular in the last quarter century. If such a trend is indeed perceptible, it would seem to be weak and slight. And if such a trend is operating over a time frame extending further back into history than that examined here, as some studies suggest,¹³ it is beyond our ability with these data to detect it.

What these data do show with greater certainty, however, is that varying levels of religious strength or vitality among emerging adults are evident in different major American religious traditions. Evangelical Protestant and black Protestant emerging adults generally reflect higher levels of religious commitment and practice and more allegiance to at least certain theological beliefs than do Catholics and mainline Protestants. In the last quarter century, the latter two groups, especially Catholics, have experienced significant declines in regular religious service attendance by emerging adults; have not kept pace with the increases among evangelical Protestants and black Protestants in

percent identifying as strongly religious; and, unlike evangelical Protestants and black Protestants, have seen no increase in the percent holding more traditional views of the Bible. On the other hand, Catholic (and black Protestants) have significantly increased in the number of their emerging adults who believe in life after death, effectively matching by 2006 the evangelical Protestants’ and mainline Protestants’ levels. Overall, then, the preponderance of evidence here shows emerging adults ages 18 to 25 actually *remaining the same or growing more religious* between 1972 and 2006—with the notable exceptions of significantly declining regular church attendance among Catholics and mainline Protestants, a near doubling in the percent of nonreligious emerging adults, and significant growth in the percent of emerging adults identifying as religiously liberal.

One plausible—though certainly not definitive—interpretation of these results is that the larger cultural world has changed around emerging adults from the 1970s to the 2000s in certain ways that have heightened young people’s openness to and comfort with religious and spiritual matters. Emerging adults in the 1970s were the first generation to carry out in middle class American life the cultural revolution of the 1960s.¹⁴ The larger popular culture of that era was still oriented around the outlook of ideological modernity—most ordinary people still assumed or believed in universal rationality, liberal progress, scientific objectivity and enlightenment, and shared projects of human emancipation.¹⁵ Part of that culture of modernity involved skepticism about, if not outright rejection of, religion. In such a cultural climate, emerging adults would have felt some pressures against taking religion very seriously. By the 1990s and 2000s, however, modernist ideology had been at least partly displaced, especially in certain spheres of social life,¹⁶ by a “postmodern” culture that stressed difference over unity, relativity over universals, subjective experience over rational authorities, feeling over reason, situated perspectives over objectivity, the local over the national, audiences over authors, and a more general skepticism toward any “master narratives,” not merely the specific narratives of religion, “superstition,” and tradition. In this cultural climate, religion lost, at least in theory, any remaining principled, authoritative standing to make truth claims that it might have enjoyed in previous eras of history. Nevertheless, religion at least now enjoyed a somewhat more “level playing field” among all ideologies and movements, insofar as all perspectives were relativized by postmodernism and so were assumed ultimately to be equally valid or invalid. As a part of this cultural shift, spiritual characters and themes increasingly began to show up noticeably in mainstream mass media, representing an apparently growing acceptance of elements of spirituality and religion among both media producers and audiences.¹⁷ In this kind of context, emerging adults would have felt less pressure, compared to an earlier era dominated by ideological modernity, to distrust or spurn religion—even if they would not have necessarily felt compelled to take religion very seriously either. Such a cultural shift may help to explain the evidence in this chapter for modest increases in religiosity among emerging adults in recent decades—increases that at least some other studies have also noted.¹⁸

On the basis of the findings in this chapter, one can be confident that whatever the remaining chapters reveal about the religious and spiritual lives of contemporary emerging adults, these persons are not typical religiously of all 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. Whether today's emerging adults will become significantly more (or perhaps less) religious as they grow up is not yet known. Evidence not presented in this chapter suggests that most likely some of them will become more religious as they age, but also that this change is likely to be less widespread in the end than has been the case in previous generations.¹⁹ To return to the evidence of the current chapter: Emerging adults are, on most sociological measures, the least religious adults in the United States today. Furthermore, Catholic and mainline Protestant emerging adults tend to be less religious than evangelical Protestants and black Protestants, according to the sociological measures used here. This chapter has also shown that emerging adults in America since 1972 have generally not become less religious, at least as measured by the variety of sociological survey questions considered in this chapter. The significant exception here is weekly or frequent church attendance by Catholic and mainline Protestant emerging adults, which has dropped noticeably in past decades. Other than that, however, most emerging adults have since 1972 either remained stable in their measured levels of religiousness or have actually increased somewhat. We see little evidence here of massive secularization among America's emerging adults in the last quarter century—the exception being regular church attendance declines among Catholics and mainline Protestants—at least the kind that survey questions are able to detect. If there has been any form of increasing religious decline, weakening, or decay in the past quarter century, it has to have been of a more subtle, cultural, or internal nature—for example, a growth in more social club-oriented motives and in less God- or religious convictions-oriented motives for attending church at the same frequency, a decline in the overall shared cultural standards for what counts as a “strong” religious faith, or an increase in the selfish and instrumental use of personal prayer. Those kinds of possible cultural religious transformations are much more difficult than frequency of church attendance and prayer to measure and track. This book contains little that can speak with authority to those kinds of questions. Our concern rather is to describe and explain the religious and spiritual lives of the present generation of emerging adults; we turn more directly to this task in the next chapter.

4

Religious Affiliations, Practices, Beliefs, Experiences, and More

THIS CHAPTER DRAWS ON NSYR survey data to provide nationally representative descriptive statistics about the religious and spiritual lives of American emerging adults ages 18 to 23. It also compares these statistics with those of the same youth sample surveyed five years earlier, when they were 13 to 17 years old. This enables us to examine the distributions and proportions in various religious measures among emerging adults in 2007 and 2008 and how they may have changed over the five-year period representing the transition from the teenage to the emerging adult years of life. In the following tables, the statistics representing 18- to 23-year-old emerging adults are presented first without parentheses. These statistics are then compared to statistics on the same survey measures taken five years earlier, presenting the percentage increase or decrease for each measure in parentheses. There are in this chapter a lot of numbers to digest, which takes focused concentration. But the numbers are revealing and important for telling a crucial aspect of this book's larger story, and so worth making the effort to grasp what they reveal.

RELIGIOUS AFFILIATIONS

Basic Religion

The first question addressed here concerns the religious affiliations of emerging adults. By this we mean stated membership, association, or identification with different major religious traditions and organizations. We begin this chapter by presenting differences in religious affiliations considered in different ways: