

The Spiritual Development of Young adults

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On Emerging Adults

One of my favorite experiences of working in a university setting is the opportunity to sit down with students, staff, and faculty and visit. Usually, the initial contact is mine. I send an email asking the person if they would like to visit over a cup of coffee or lunch. Always my treat.

Some time ago I had the blessing of sitting down with Marie (not her real name). I was intrigued by this young woman's story. I had met Marie on her sophomore year. I was advising a student organization that focused on service. Monthly, we would go out into the community and spend a morning doing some type of volunteer work. During the winter break we engaged a community different than ours and after commencement weekend, we engaged a community outside the United States. Needless to say, I spent much time interacting with all these emerging adults.

What intrigued me the most about Marie was her experience of spirituality. She was passionate about the needs of others. I understand that many people are, but Marie was not just passionate; but she also reached out in care and compassion. She was purely motivated by love. Theologically, I saw her behavior as a response to a religious experience. Yet, she never spoke of spirituality or religion. I was curious, I needed to know what the genesis of her love for others.

We started with small talk and moved into deeper conversation. I asked, "Tell me about your spirituality." She looked down, somewhat puzzled by the question. "What do you mean?" I responded, "You know, what is your religious background?" Relieved by a clearer question, Marie went on to explain she was raised Roman Catholic but that she did not consider herself a Christian. She went on to explain all the things that she loved about Christianity; Jesus and his emphasis on love and concern for others, God's unrelenting love for humans and creation, and the idea of community.

"So, you believe in God?" I asked. "Yes" she answered. "And you believe in Jesus as God's son?" She replied, "Yes." I was genuinely puzzled at this time, "But you don't consider yourself a Christian?" Marie smiled, then, continued, "I disagree with positions that my church has taken. I disagree with positions that Christians take. There are some things from other religions that I really like and practice. Plus, I don't think I know enough about the Christian faith for me to make a commitment. This is why I don't consider myself a Christian."

Marie is not unique in her experience of God. This transition away from childhood faith has been studied much over the years. As early as 1981, James Fowler [1] attempted to establish that, just as there are stages for psychosocial, cognitive, and moral development, [2] there also must be stages for faith development. Using as point of origin Daniel Levinson's *Eras of the Life Cycle*, Fowler states that "[These] faith stages... are not to be understood as an achievement scale by which to evaluate the worth of persons. Nor do they represent educational or therapeutic goals toward which to hurry people. Seeing their optimal correlations with psychosocial eras gives a sense of how time, experience, challenge, and nurture are required for growth in faith." [3] Fowler does not intend to box an individual's faith development within a certain stage of his theory. These stages represent where an individual should be at certain points in her/his life regarding faith development. His ideal stage for emerging adulthood corresponds to the fourth out of six stages which he calls Individuative-Reflective Faith.

During this stage, individuals are both emotionally and geographically separated from their places of origin. This separation drives them "to look with critical awareness at the assumptive system of values he(sic) and his(sic) family had shared." [4] In addition to the distance between the individual and the individual's previous system of values, there must also be "an interruption of reliance on external sources of authority." [5]

Other studies echoes in his research Fowler's claims. Jesse Smith argues for a similar process in adults who abandon theism. He explains is in four stages: 1) being brought up in a religious (or somewhat religious) environment; 2) leaving that environment to one that questions theism by *unlearning* theistic beliefs and practice; 3) becoming atheist not as a rejection of theism but as a new identity; and, 4) coming out as atheist. What I found fascinating about this study is that this movement happens in the years of emerging adulthood. Young adults, like Marie, go to college where they often question many of the assumptions of their childhood. Smith notes that "research has found that going off to college tends to be an important stage in individuals' lives in terms of experimenting with, and developing new identities and establishing a more autonomous sense of self." [6] This experience not only accomplishes an "interruption" with the individual's traditional sources of authority, but it also removes the individual from the emotional and geographical ties of her/his place of origin. This study is about identity building and not about atheism in itself. Anyone would be missing the point by making the assumption that every individual who goes through this process will end up leaving theism. What his study reveals is what Fowler suggests. Emerging adults have encountered themselves in a position where they have to make choices regarding their beliefs to make sense of the world they live in. Marie is in that place. She is rejecting the practices of her childhood while fusing them with new found meaning-making practices. This has led Marie to a currently emerging but more authentic and helpful religious identity.

Marie is not alone. Students are relying in new knowledge to patch holes or substitute aspects of their religious system. There are times when they completely substitute their beliefs in a similar process to what Smith proposes. In my experience, the vast majority of students don't go to that length. They find patches from other religious traditions to make meaning out of

their experience with God. In many of my conversations, it is not rare to meet a Wesleyan Atheist or a Wesleyan Catholic. These are students that have found doctrines of the Methodist movement useful for their religious experience. Some of these doctrines include: social holiness, sacraments, the role of reason in religious thought, and the role of women in the Church and in social change. We cannot expect emerging adults to have a static faith. When parts or the whole of a religious system does not fit the individual's worldview, they have ease of access to unlimited amounts of religious practices through the multiple circles they belong to. They tinker with their religious system until they find the right fit for them. This characteristic of emerging adults is a trait that cannot be ignored.

But only approaching the phenomenon through the lens of generational studies will not produce a helpful understanding of the world of emerging adults. Until recently, generations have been understood using the same framework as genealogies. There is an understanding of succession with every generation. In order to understand one, the previous has to be studied. The genealogical framework is key: just as it is important to understand the relationship between an individual and her parents and grandparents and so on, so it is the same with the understanding of generations. Even more, according to previous patterns we are able to predict the behaviors and experiences of future generations.^[7] Robert Wuthnow notes that “the problem with this way of thinking... comes when we want to make broader generalizations about historical events and social change.”^[8] Even when this approach may have served to understand previous generations such as the Baby Boomers, it does not seem to be as relevant to the current generations of emerging adults. Wuthnow makes an argument that there is no decisive historical event that has marked this current generation of emerging adults like the Vietnam War was for Baby Boomers or World War II was for the Builders. There are some interconnections regarding behavior that a previous generation like the Baby Boomers hold in common with the current generation of emerging adults. These include a desired emphasis on experience and an affinity for small groups. In order to fully be in partnership with emerging adults it would best serve us to look at the sustained trends that are defining their generation.

The first thing to point out is that this generation of emerging adults is taking longer in reaching full adulthood. It is not rare to see emerging adults struggling through college trying to figure out what they are supposed to be in life. They go to college and study what they are passionate about, but that does not necessarily turn into a career. Often the months before graduation are the busiest for me as I visit with frustrated college seniors who do not know what their next step will be. Some of them put their careers on hold for a year or two as they embark on traveling, sometimes volunteering through international or national programs. This venture is often known as a “gap year.”^[9]

This uncertainty about a vocational/professional life often delays their joining social institutions that require commitment and establishing roots. These institutions include marriage, having children, and joining a church. This perceived delay makes sense. Earlier generations had a shorter life span. In 1900 life expectancy for men was 46.3 years and for women 48.3. In 1950 men's life expectancy was 65.6 and for women 71.1 years. In the year 2000 was 74.3 years for

men and 79.7 years for women. [10] In one century life expectancy rose nearly by 30 years. It is no coincidence that persons have more time to spend in different areas of their psycho-social development because our lifetime is longer. It is taking longer for emerging adults to become adults.

A second thing to consider is that emerging adults are also *tinkerers*. “A tinkerer puts together a life from whatever skills, ideas, and resource that are readily at hand.” [11] I believe that this tinkering is something that is characteristic of our time due, in part, to the accessibility to information we have today. For us, tinkering is unavoidable. We may tinker with our thoughts and opinions on any given issue because there is so much information available to help us make sense of the world. Religious thought is not immune to this. I remember when I was two years removed from seminary; I was appointed to a church as an associate pastor. That same year the senior pastor preached a sermon series on “Christianity and the Religions of the World.” The purpose of the series was to look at other religions and see what we could glean from them to make us better Christians. For example, Islam could teach us about the importance of prayer; Buddhism about meditation; Judaism about charity; etc. In my mind, that series was tinkering with religious thought. Tinkering cannot be seen exclusively with a negative connotation. Tinkering is something that we can do now because of the ease of access to information. At times we tinker our thoughts and practices to justify destructive behavior. But more often than not, we tinker to enrich our lives. “The key to understanding the life of a... tinkerer is uncertainty. The tinkerer’s life is sufficiently uncertain that is impossible to solve problems through predefined solutions... Our world is filled with the kinds of uncertainty that make tinkering a necessity.” [12]

Emerging adults are taking longer to develop into committed community members and they tinker with their lives out of necessity. These two characteristics have challenged a Church that is graying and that wants to function with certainty.

[1] James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

[2] Jacques Piaget proposed the stages of psychosocial development; Erik Erikson the stages of cognitive development; and, Lawrence Kohlberg the stages of moral development.

[3] Fowler, 114

[4] Fowler, 177

[5] Fowler, 179

[6] J. M. Smith, “Becoming an Atheist in America: Constructing Identity and Meaning from the Rejection of Theism,” *Sociology of Religion* 72, no. 2 (2010): 223.

[7]See William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069*(New York: Morrow, 1991). The subtitle asserts to be able to predict generational patterns 78 years after the publication of the book!

[8]Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion*(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 3.

[9]"The Gap Year Experience: A Life-Changing Opportunity," Test Prep, accessed July 03, 2016, <http://www.princetonreview.com/study-abroad/college-abroad/gap-year>.

[10]Wuthnow, 10.

[11]Ibid, 13.

[12]Ibid., 14.