

A Congregation of One: Individualized Religious Beliefs Among Emerging Adults

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Religious beliefs and practices were examined among 140 emerging adults aged 21 to 28, using quantitative and qualitative methods. There was great diversity in the importance they ascribed to religion, in their attendance at religious services, and in the content of their religious beliefs. Overall, their beliefs fell into four roughly even categories—agnostic/atheist, deist, liberal Christian, and conservative Christian—but there was also considerable diversity within each category. In combination, the quantitative and qualitative results showed that the participants' beliefs were highly individualized, that there was little relationship between childhood religious socialization and current religious attendance or beliefs, and that the participants were often skeptical of religious institutions. The results reflect the individualism of American society as well as the focus in emerging adulthood on forming one's own beliefs.

It is well established that the late teens and early 20s are ages of relatively low religious participation in American society. Even many young people who attended religious services frequently as children and adolescents fall off in their religious participation in their late teens and 20s (Gallup & Castelli, 1989; Gallup & Lindsay, 1999; Hoge, Dinges, Johnson, & Gonzales, 1998a, 1998b; Hoge, Johnson, & Luidens, 1993). Most young people leave home after high school (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999), and the change of residence often breaks the tie to the religious institution they had attended while growing up (Hoge et al., 1993). Leaving home also removes the encouragement and perhaps the coercion of parents to attend religious services.

Other reasons for the drop in religious participation in the late teens and early 20s include becoming busy with other activities, doubting previously held beliefs, and simply losing interest in being involved in a religious institu-

tion (Hoge et al., 1998a, 1998b). However, religious participation tends to rise in the late 20s, as young people marry, have children, settle down personally and geographically, and express an increased spiritual need for religious involvement (Gallup & Castelli, 1989; Hoge, Dinges, et al., 1998a, 1998b; Hoge, Johnson, et al., 1993; Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy, & Waite, 1995; Wilson & Sandomirsky, 1991).

Most studies on the religiosity of young people in their late teens and 20s have focused on the issue of why their religious participation tends to fall and then rise again. Here, we focus more directly on the religious beliefs and attitudes of young people in their 20s. What are their religious beliefs? How important a part does religion play in their lives? To what extent is their childhood religious socialization related to their current beliefs? How do they view religious institutions?

The conceptual framework used here for understanding young people's religious beliefs is the theory of *emerging adulthood*. Emerging adulthood has been proposed as a term for the new period that has opened up in the life course of people in industrialized societies during the past half-century, bridging adolescence and young adulthood (Arnett, 1998, 2000a, 2000b). During recent decades the median ages of marriage and first birth in the United States have risen to unprecedented levels, into the late 20s (Arnett, 2000b). Similarly, rates of participation in higher education after secondary school have steadily increased, so that by now more than two thirds of young Americans obtain at least some higher education (Bianchi & Spain, 1996). As a consequence of these changes, the late teens and early 20s are no longer a period of intensive preparation for and entry into stable and enduring adult roles but are more typically a period of exploring various life possibilities while postponing role transitions into the middle to late 20s (Arnett, 1998, 2000a, 2000b).

Exploration is central to development during emerging adulthood. The explorations described decades ago by Erikson (1950, 1968) and Marcia (1966) as part of identity formation in adolescence now extend well into the 20s for most young people in industrialized societies. In areas such as love, work, and ideology, many emerging adults explore diverse possibilities. The focus during emerging adulthood tends to be on self-development and on becoming independent and self-sufficient (Arnett, 1998). Part of this process, in the view of most emerging adults, is forming a distinctive set of beliefs about religious issues. Several studies have indicated that deciding on one's own beliefs and values is one of the criteria young people view as most important to becoming an adult (Arnett, 1997, 1998; Greene, Wheatley, & Aldava, 1992).

Emerging adulthood is a period of the life course when the focus tends to be on self-development and self-sufficiency; in addition, today's emerging adults are coming of age in an especially individualistic period in American society (Alwin, 1988; Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Jensen, 1995). In the course of the 20th century, the qualities American parents most desired to teach their children changed from obedience and respect for others to independence and self-esteem (Alwin, 1988). With regard to religious beliefs in particular, surveys indicate that a strong majority of Americans agree that individuals should form their religious beliefs independently of religious institutions (Gallup & Castelli, 1989).

Few studies have yet explored the content of emerging adults' religious beliefs, but one recent theoretical exposition was presented by Beaudoin (1998). Beaudoin theorized that the themes of the religiosity of "Generation X" include skepticism about the value of religious institutions and an emphasis on personal experience rather than religious authorities as a source of religious beliefs. Beaudoin also emphasized the tentative, ambiguous quality of young people's religious beliefs. He interpreted this as reflecting the shifting, unfixed nature of young people's identities and their preference during their late teens and 20s to remain open to changing their beliefs rather than arriving on a fixed set of beliefs.

Roof (1993) has made similar observations about the baby boom generation. According to Roof, many boomers regard personal experience and self-discovery as more important to their religious faith than religious institutions and customs. In Roof's view, boomers mix and match ideas from a variety of sources and traditions to create new, individualized faiths. More generally, Hervieu-Leger (1993) argued that religious traditions have become "symbolic toolboxes" (p. 141) from which individuals can draw without accepting as a whole the worldview that was historically part of the religion.

In this study, the goal was to examine the content of emerging adults' religious beliefs. There were three hypotheses. Based on previous studies and on the nature of emerging adulthood as a time of focusing on self-development and self-sufficiency, we expected emerging adults to emphasize forming their own beliefs independently of their parents' beliefs. Specifically, we expected emerging adults' religious beliefs to be highly diverse and individualized as they drew from a variety of cultural sources in the course of constructing their beliefs. We also expected to find only a weak relationship between childhood religious socialization and religious beliefs in emerging adulthood because emerging adults would be intent on deciding on their own beliefs. Furthermore, we expected emerging adults to have only a tenuous tie to religious institutions, even when they had been raised in a specific reli-

gious tradition, because institutional membership would be viewed as a compromise of their individuality.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 140 persons aged 21 to 28. General characteristics of the sample are shown in Table 1. Close to half of the participants were married, and about one fourth had at least one child. Two thirds of the participants were employed full-time, and one fourth were employed part-time. A total of 28% were in school full-time, and 8% were part-time students. "Some college" was the modal level of education, indicated by 52% of the participants. There was a broad range of variability in the social class of the participants' families of origin, as indicated by father's and mother's education.

Procedure

The data presented here were collected as part of a larger study on emerging adults in their 20s. The study took place in a medium-sized city in the Midwest. Potential participants were identified through enrollment lists from the two local high schools for the previous 3 to 10 years. All persons on the enrollment lists who had a current local address that could be identified through phone book listings or through contacting their parents were sent a letter describing the study, then contacted by phone. Of the persons contacted, 72% agreed to participate in the study. Data collection took place in the first author's office or the participant's home, depending on the participant's preference. Interviews were conducted by the first author and two research assistants.

Measures

The study included an interview and a questionnaire. Six items on the questionnaire pertained to religion and concerned religious attendance, the importance ascribed to religion, the certainty of the participant's beliefs, and belief in God (see Table 2). Two questions in the interview pertained specifically to participants' childhood exposure to religion and participants' current religious beliefs (see Table 2).

Coding categories for each interview question were developed from reading through the interviews and identifying common themes. The two authors

TABLE 1: Background Characteristics of the Sample

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>%</i>
Gender	
Male	53
Female	47
Ethnicity	
White	94
Black	5
Other	1
Current educational status	
In school full-time	28
In school part-time	8
Not in school	65
Mother's education	
Less than high school degree	8
High school degree	23
Some college	23
College degree	27
Some graduate school or graduate degree	19
Father's education	
Less than high school	8
High school degree	24
Some college	15
College degree	24
Some graduate school or graduate degree	30
Employment	
Full	67
Part	24
None	9
Marital status	
Married	60
Single	40
Number of children	
None	73
One	14
Two or more	13

NOTE: Some categories do not add up to 100% due to rounding of figures.

independently coded all participants' responses to the two interview questions. Rate of agreement was more than 80% for each question. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

The full text of the interview question on childhood exposure to religious socialization was "Were you brought up to believe any particular set of reli-

TABLE 2: Religiosity of Emerging Adults

<i>Question</i>	<i>%</i>
How often do you attend religious services?	
About 3 to 4 times a month	19
About 1 to 2 times a month	10
Once every few months	20
About 1 to 2 times a year or less	50
How important is it to you to attend religious services?	
Very important	16
Quite important	11
Somewhat important	24
Not at all important	50
How important to you are your religious beliefs?	
Very important	30
Quite important	22
Somewhat important	30
Not at all important	18
How important is religious faith in your daily life?	
Very important	27
Quite important	20
Somewhat important	21
Not at all important	32
How certain are you about your religious beliefs?	
Very certain	38
Quite certain	33
Somewhat uncertain	21
Very uncertain	8
To what extent do you believe that God or some higher power watches over you and guides your life?	
Strongly believe this	52
Somewhat believe this	22
Somewhat skeptical of this	16
Definitely do not believe this	10
Were you brought up to believe any particular set of religious beliefs, or did your parents more or less leave it up to you?	
High exposure	64
Moderate exposure	13
Low exposure	23
What are your religious or spiritual beliefs now, if any?	
Agnostic/atheist	24
Deist	29
Liberal Christian	26
Conservative Christian	22

NOTE: The first six questions in the table are from the questionnaire. The final two questions are coded questions from the interview. Some categories do not add up to 100% due to rounding of figures.

gious beliefs, or did your parents more or less leave it up to you?" The categories for the coding of this interview question were

Low exposure: Parents rarely or never took children to church; religion clearly was not important to them.

Moderate exposure: Parents made some effort to take children to church and expose them to religious ideas but not on a regular basis; and/or parents did not attend themselves; and/or religion did not seem very important to parents. Parents may have taken children to church now and then in a perfunctory way.

High exposure: Parents took children to church on a regular and fairly frequent basis and clearly regarded religion as important.

The full text of the question on current religious beliefs was "What are your religious or spiritual beliefs now, if any?" The categories for the coding of this question were

Agnostic/atheist: Person explicitly rejects any belief in religion or declares that he or she is unsure about own beliefs, and/or says it is not possible to know anything about God.

Deist: Person declares a general belief in God or "spirituality," but only in a general sense not in the context of any religious tradition. Person may refer to self as "Christian," but beliefs do not reflect traditional Christian dogma and may even explicitly reject parts of the Christian dogma (e.g., that Jesus was the son of God). Person may also reject organized religion generally and may include idiosyncratic personal elements drawn from various sources, such as Eastern religions, witchcraft, and popular culture.

Liberal Christian: Person describes self as Christian (or as adherent of particular denomination, e.g., Methodist, Lutheran, Catholic). However, person may express skepticism about the institution of the church and/or about some aspects of Christian dogma, such as the idea that Christianity is the only true faith. Person may express favorable or at least tolerant view of other (non-Christian) faiths.

Conservative Christian: Person expresses belief in traditional Christian dogma, for example, that Jesus is the son of God and the only way to salvation. Person may mention being saved or refer to afterlife of heaven and hell. Person may mention that Christianity is the only true faith.

Only one participant in the study had a Jewish background, and his response was coded as "deist."

RESULTS

The three hypotheses of the study were that emerging adults' religious beliefs would be highly individualized, that childhood religious socialization

would be only weakly related to religious beliefs in emerging adulthood, and that emerging adults would be skeptical of religious institutions. These three hypotheses will be used as the framework for describing the results, combining quantitative and qualitative data. First, the overall patterns of the quantitative analyses will be presented.

Quantitative Analyses

Age, gender, marital status, parenthood status, educational attainment, mother's education, and father's education were analyzed in relation to each of the religious variables shown in Table 2. Chi-square tests were used for the analyses involving gender, marital status (married vs. unmarried), and parenthood status (no children vs. one or more children). Bivariate correlations were used for the analyses involving age, educational attainment, mother's education, and father's education.

Age and educational attainment were unrelated to any of the religious variables. In the analyses by gender, women were more likely than men to indicate that it is important to them to attend religious services, $\chi^2(1, 118) = 8.70, p < .05$; and more likely to indicate that religious faith was important in their daily lives, $\chi^2(1, 94) = 11.98, p < .01$. Women were also more likely to be liberal Christians and less likely to be agnostics/atheists, $\chi^2(1, 130) = 10.43, p < .05$. With regard to marital status, married persons were more likely to be conservative Christians, and single persons were more likely to be deists, $\chi^2(3, 122) = 11.79, p < .01$. Married persons were also more likely than single persons to attend religious services, $\chi^2(3, 116) = 11.34, p < .05$; to indicate that it is important to them to attend religious services, $\chi^2(3, 116) = 8.52, p < .05$; and to indicate that religious beliefs are important to them, $\chi^2(3, 136) = 11.10, p < .05$.

Parenthood status was also related to the religious variables. Parents were more likely than nonparents to be religiously conservative and less likely to be agnostics or deists, $\chi^2(3, 125) = 16.64, p < .001$. Parents were also more likely than nonparents to attend religious services, $\chi^2(3, 119) = 11.00, p < .05$; to indicate that it is important to them to attend religious services, $\chi^2(3, 119) = 11.34, p < .05$; to indicate that religious beliefs are important to them, $\chi^2(3, 136), p < .05$; to indicate that religious beliefs are important in their daily lives, $\chi^2(3, 94) = 9.58, p < .05$; and to believe that God or some higher power watches over them and guides their lives, $\chi^2(3, 119) = 15.67, p < .01$.

Mother's education was inversely related to several religious variables, with persons with mothers who had relatively lower education being more likely to indicate that religious beliefs are important to them, ($r = -.22, p < .05$); that religious beliefs are important in their daily lives, ($r = -.24, p < .05$);

and that they believe God or some higher power watches over them and guides their lives ($r = -.21, p < .05$). Similarly, father's education was inversely related to participants believing it is important to attend religious services, ($r = -.22, p < .05$); to indicating that religious beliefs are important to them, ($r = -.22, p < .05$), and to believing that God or some higher power watches over them and guides their lives, ($r = -.21, p < .05$).

Emerging Adults' Beliefs Are Highly Individualized

The emerging adults in this study were highly diverse in their religious beliefs and practices, as shown in Table 2. Half reported rarely or never attending religious services, but the other half attended occasionally or regularly, with about one fifth attending 3 to 4 times per month. Half reported that it was not at all important to them to attend religious services, whereas, for the other half, the importance of attendance varied from "somewhat important" to "very important." Participants also varied widely in their views of the importance of their religious beliefs, the importance of religious faith in their daily lives, and their belief in God. In the classification of their current beliefs—the coded responses to the question "What are your religious or spiritual beliefs now, if any?"—participants were spread more or less evenly among the four categories: agnostic/atheist, deist, liberal Christian, and conservative Christian (Table 2).

The quantitative results indicated that emerging adults' religious views are highly diverse, and the qualitative results provided numerous examples of this diversity. In their responses to the question about their current religious or spiritual beliefs, emerging adults often combined concepts and practices from different religious and nonreligious traditions in unique, highly individualized ways.

One reason their beliefs were highly individualized was that the emerging adults expressed a high value on thinking for themselves with regard to religious questions and on forming a unique set of religious beliefs rather than accepting a ready-made dogma. For example, Will described himself as a Christian, but he also said he believed that

you don't have to be one religion. Take a look at all of them, see if there is something in them you like—almost like an a la carte belief system. I think all religions have things that are good about them.

Josie said "I was raised Catholic . . . and I guess if I had to consider myself anything I would consider myself Catholic," but she also said,

I don't have any really strong beliefs because I believe that whatever you feel, it's personal. . . . Everybody has their own idea of God and what God is, and because you go to a church doesn't define it any better because you still have your own personal beliefs of how you feel about it and what's acceptable for you and what's right for you personally.

In forming their individualized beliefs, emerging adults often combined Christian beliefs with Eastern ideas such as reincarnation or with ideas taken from popular culture. Julie's father was a minister in a Disciples of Christ church, and she went to church every Sunday growing up, but at age 23, her beliefs had become a pastiche of New Age, Eastern, and Christian notions.

A lot of my beliefs border on what would be labeled as witchcraft. I believe that objects can capture energy and hold it. . . . I do believe it's possible to communicate with people who have died. . . . I do believe in reincarnation. . . . I believe I've had past lives. . . . I am what I would label a "guardian angel," and there are certain people that I'm supposed to help out.

Joseph invoked ideas from *Star Wars*, which he combined with ideas from a variety of religions. He said his parents "put me through a Catholic Sunday school; I was baptized and stuff." Now his beliefs are eclectic.

I've read some Joseph Campbell, and just the theory that all these religions, Mohammed and Buddha and Jesus, all the patterns there are very similar. . . . And I believe that there's a spirit, an energy. Not necessarily a guy or something like that, but maybe just a power force. Like in *Star Wars*—the Force. The thing that makes it possible to live.

Childhood Religious Socialization Has Limited Effects

Nearly two thirds of participants were coded as having had high exposure to religious socialization; the coding was based on their response to the interview question about whether their parents had brought them up to believe any particular set of religious beliefs (Table 2). In χ^2 tests, childhood religious socialization was analyzed in relation to current religious attendance (the questionnaire item) and religious views (the coded interview question and the 5 questionnaire items on religious views). There was no relationship between childhood religious socialization and current religious attendance or between childhood religious socialization and any of the 6 items on religious views.

Although it may seem odd that childhood religious socialization did not significantly predict religious attendance or beliefs in emerging adulthood, it

is easier to understand after examining the qualitative results. These results suggest that the lack of association between their childhood religious beliefs and their current beliefs was a reflection of their individualism and of their resolve to think for themselves and form their own beliefs.

For example, Jack said he was a “full-blown Catholic” as a child, but when he was 17 years old,

I just flat told Mom I wasn't going to go any more. It was a waste of time. I didn't like it. I went because I was under Mom and Dad's rules. I did what they said to do, went to Sunday school and stuff like that. [But] I can go to church all you want, and I'm still going to believe what I believe. You're not going to change me.

The typical pattern was attending church throughout childhood but stopping as soon as parental encouragement or coercion eased, usually during adolescence. Mike said,

I had my “perfect attendance” pins for the Methodist Sunday school up until the day I was confirmed, and then they said it was up to me whether or not I go to church, and I haven't been back since. . . . I guess I would still consider myself Methodist, but in all honesty I'd probably have to say that I'm agnostic.

Theresa said,

I made a deal with my mom in high school that if I got confirmed I would never have to go to church again. And she said okay, so after I was confirmed I didn't have to get up on Sunday mornings any more, and I didn't have to fight with her about “I don't want to go to church.”

Of course, not all parents' attempts at religious socialization had come to naught. Ryan was raised in a family where “our faith was certainly present in the home,” and said that “I still believe in the principles and doctrines taught by our church.” Sharon said, “I was brought up Presbyterian, and I belong to the same church I've gone to since I was a child.” But generally, emerging adults had formed their own beliefs independently of the religious socialization provided by their parents, and overall there was no correlation between childhood religious socialization and current beliefs.

Some of those whose religious participation had waned after high school saw their unchurched status as temporary, to be resumed after they had children. Bill was among those who viewed religion as something he had no interest in now but wanted his children to be exposed to.

Growing up, we went to church every Sunday. I don't go to church every Sunday now, just because the weekends now, to me, are a time to relax and sleep late. [But] I will come around. I firmly believe that a religion should be a part of a kid's growing up.

For the one fourth of persons in the study who had children, parenthood had already inspired some of them to resume church attendance. As noted in the quantitative analyses, parents were more likely than nonparents to attend religious services and were more religious in other respects as well. For example, Sharon and her husband had recently begun attending church with their 4-year-old daughter because "we both decided that we better start going because we have a child now, and we need to give her some type of feeling of church." Some parents viewed religious socialization as part of their children's moral socialization. Tom said he and his wife planned to begin attending with their young daughters because "I think religion has a lot to do with ethics and morals and values. . . . I think it has a lot to do with teaching them right from wrong."

Emerging Adults Are Skeptical of Religious Institutions

Religious beliefs were more likely than attendance at religious services to be important to emerging adults. Although 50% indicated that it was "not at all important" to them to attend religious services, only 18% indicated that their religious beliefs were "not at all important" to them (Table 2). Also, 47% reported that religious faith was "quite" or "very" important in their daily lives, compared to 27% for whom attendance at religious services was "quite" or "very" important.

In the qualitative results, many emerging adults expressed skepticism about the value of religious institutions. Ryan said,

I don't think that organized religion as a whole is a good thing, I really don't . . . I just think that having an organized religion is like having a gang. It's your beliefs against their beliefs, and whoever is left standing at the end is the one whose beliefs are the best.

Sometimes their rejection of religious institutions was based on negative experiences. Tracy had unpleasant memories of her church experiences in childhood. "I remember going to church [as a child] and being bored, and seeing everybody around me being bored." By emerging adulthood she had rejected the Catholicism of her youth because of

the guilt. I got so sick of feeling guilty all the time. And, oh God, "lust is so awful." I really feel like there are things that are natural to us, because yes, we are human, but we also still have animal tendencies, and you can't guilt those out of people. And I decided that, yes, I did have an animal in me and I wasn't going to guilt my animal any more because it made me unhappy. So I gave up being Catholic.

Another reason for emerging adults' skepticism about religious institutions was that they tended to view participation in any institution as a compromise of their individuality. As Gabe said, "I'm just not real big on the church thing. I think that's a manmade thing. I don't need anyone telling me what's right or wrong. I know what's right and wrong." Similarly, Curtis viewed clerical exhortations as a threat to his individual autonomy:

I believe in God; I just don't necessarily believe in an organized religion. . . . Jesus was probably an actual thing, but I don't think you have to go to church to worship God and his teachings. I think God is in here, in how you feel, and not what somebody at the pulpit's telling you God is.

Many expressed the view that they could be religious or spiritual on their own without institutional membership. In Jerry's view,

Just being outside is more spiritual to me than going in and sitting in a church with a bunch of people and somebody preaching from the Bible. I think it's almost more religious and more spiritual for me to go out in the woods by myself or go fishing.

Similarly, Jean observed,

I'm the kind of person that feels that you don't have to go to church to be religious. I mean, that's just something that you do for yourself. It's not necessary to be in a certain place to be religious.

DISCUSSION

What do emerging adults in American society believe about religious issues? "Whatever they choose for themselves" might be a concise summary of the study presented here. The salient impression of the results is that emerging adults form their beliefs independently with little influence from their parents or religious institutions. Consequently, their beliefs are extremely diverse as they form unique combinations of beliefs from various religious traditions as well as other sources, including popular culture. It is

not just that religious traditions have become “symbolic toolboxes” (Hervieu-Leger, 1993, p. 141) from which young people can draw freely, but that these traditions are only one source among many from which young people construct their religious beliefs.

Overall, their beliefs fell more or less evenly into four categories: agnostic/atheist, deist, liberal Christian, and conservative Christian. Within these categories, there was also considerable diversity. The diversity of religious beliefs among the emerging adults in this study reflects the fact that they have grown up in a pluralistic society. No matter what religious socialization they have received in their families, they have also been exposed to diverse influences from friends, schools, and popular culture. Out of these diverse materials, they construct their own beliefs by the time they reach emerging adulthood. Often, the beliefs they form bear little or no resemblance to what their parents believed and taught them to believe (Hoge, Dinges, et al., 1998b; Hoge, Johnson, et al., 1993).

Perhaps it should not be so surprising that there is little relationship between childhood religious socialization and religious beliefs in emerging adulthood. As young people grow beyond childhood into adolescence and emerging adulthood, the strength of family socialization wanes while the influence of socialization sources outside the family increases (Arnett, 1995; Larson, Richards, Moneta, Holmbeck, & Duckett, 1996). Because young people view it as both their right and their responsibility to form their beliefs and values independently of their parents (Arnett, 1997, 1998), they pick and choose from the ideas they discover as they go along and combine them to form their own unique, individualized set of beliefs, “an à la carte belief system.”

Emerging adults view their independence from their parents’ beliefs as a good and necessary thing. In their view, simply to accept what their parents have taught them about religion and carry on the same religious tradition as their parents would represent a kind of failure, an abdication of their responsibility to think for themselves, become independent from their parents, and decide on their own beliefs. Quite consciously and deliberately, they seek to form a set of beliefs about religious questions that will be distinctly their own. Forming one’s own beliefs and values is part of the process of identity formation in an individualistic culture and part of the process of becoming an adult (Arnett, 1998; Erikson, 1950, 1968).

An emphasis on individualism also underlies their rejection of religious institutions. Just as it would be wrong in their eyes for them to accept wholesale the beliefs of their parents, so many of them view participation in religious institutions as an intolerable compromise of their individuality. Participating in a religious institution inherently means subscribing to a common set

of beliefs, declaring that you hold certain beliefs that other members of the institution also hold. To the majority of emerging adults, this is anathema. They prefer to think of their beliefs as unique, the product of their own individual questioning and exploring (Beaudoin, 1998).

Will they return to religious institutions as they grow beyond emerging adulthood? Other studies have indicated that young people often return to religious participation once they marry and have children (Gallup & Castelli, 1989; Hoge, Dinges, et al., 1998a, 1998b; Hoge, Johnson, et al., 1993; Stolzenberg et al., 1995; Wilson & Sandomirsky, 1991). In the present study too, being married and having children were both related to higher likelihood of religious participation. Thus, it appears that for some members of the current cohort of young people, as in previous cohorts, their departure from religious participation is temporary, to be resumed once they enter adult roles of marriage and parenthood. However, like the baby boomers before them, they may retain the individualism of their beliefs even as they (and their children) return to religious institutions (Roof, 1993).

Even for emerging adults who are not currently involved in religious institutions, it is not as if they are uninterested in religious issues. On the contrary, their responses in the interviews show that they have given religious issues much thought. Also, their responses to the questionnaire items indicated that religious beliefs are important to many for whom religious participation is not. However, for the most part, they have concluded that at this time of their lives their beliefs are best observed not through regular participation in a religious institution with other, like-minded believers, but by themselves, in the privacy of their own hearts and minds, in a congregation of one.

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