

**TOPIC 6:
SPIRITUALITY, YOUTH, WHATEVER**

I. Background: Mindful of Finke and Stark's lesson from their historical studies, that "there is no new thing under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9), sociologists still attempt to discern shifts in religious organizations, attitudes, and practices in the contemporary period. One way they do that is by trying to trace out cultural changes, especially those associated with generational change. For example, 62% of Americans are affiliated with some church today, compared to 17% in 1776. But is the *meaning* of that affiliation the same? Or, church attendance rates have been fairly stable over the course of the past 50 years, but is people's *experience* and *understanding* of church attendance the same today as it was in 1950? Today we'll try to look at some of these cultural and generational changes over time.

II. The Baby Boom Generation¹: One of the biggest questions in recent years is what effect Baby Boomers are having on American religion. Between 1945 and 1963, roughly 80 million people were born. They currently make up about 30% of the entire U.S. population. The standard reasoning in sociology suggests that the passing of this generation through the life course is like a "pig in a python" transforming our culture as it works its way through. Why?

A. Generations of people are what sociologists call a "cohort." Cohort effects are those effects in society that are due to the fact that people born at roughly the same time tend to experience formational life course events (puberty, high school, college, entrance into the labor force, marriage, childbearing) at roughly the same time. We can break this down into its component parts:

$$\text{Age} + \text{Period} = \text{Cohort}$$

B. Age effects are those effects that are the same for people regardless of the period of time they are living in. For example, learning to walk, learning to speak, starting school. In religion, we might observe an age related pattern of church attendance: high when young, then dropping off in college, then picking back up during child rearing, then dropping off when the kids leave home, then picking back up when facing death.

C. Period effects are those things that affect everyone in society, regardless of their age. For example, major events like wars, natural disasters, major social movements, and the like. Recently, 9/11 and the war in Iraq. In religion, for Catholics specifically, the Second Vatican Council in 1960s or the sexual abuse scandal recently.

¹ Much of this is cribbed from an introduction to sociology textbook I use: David Newman's *Sociology: Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life* (Pine Forge Press). It is standard sociological thinking.

E. The idea of a cohort effect is that not everyone experiences period effects in the same way, and that one way they vary in their experience is by age. So, cohort effects result from the combination of age and period. This is especially true when a group of people experiences a major period effect during their formative years. For example, living through the depression affected everyone in society, but it had a more formational effect on those people who were coming of age during that time.

F. The reason the Baby Boom is significant, then, is twofold:

1. There are so many people who are the same age at the same time (the “pig in the python”). In 1980, the largest age group in the US was 15-24 years old. In 1990, 25-34 years old. In 2003, 40-44 years old. In 2030, there will be twice the number of retirees than there are today.

2. The period in which they experienced their formative years was very dramatic, for lack of a better term. Baby Boomers turned 14 years old between 1959 and 1977. So, what did Baby Boomers experience in the formative years of their youth?

G. To understand religion in contemporary American society, then, we want to understand the Baby Boomers, and whether they represent a transitional generation in American religious history.

III. “I’m spiritual, not religious”

A. Finke and Stark found that 62% of Americans today are members of some religious body. Of course, that means 38% are not. Also, on any given weekend, only 25-30 percent of Americans attend religious services. So, between 40 and 75 percent of Americans could be seen as “unchurched.” Of course, unchurched does not mean unreligious. It may be that religion is just becoming increasingly privatized and/or personalized.

B. Sheilaism: You can – and should – read one of the most famous expressions of religious privatism or personalism in a book called *Habits of the Heart*. A young nurse, Sheila Larson (actually, a pseudonym), tells the interviewers, “I believe in God. I’m not a religious fanatic. I can’t remember the last time I went to church. My faith as carried me a long way. It’s Sheilaism. Just my own little voice.” Asked to specify in more detail, she says, “It’s just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think He would want us to take care of each other.” The authors conclude that “‘Sheilaism’ somehow seems a perfectly natural expression of current American religious life” (p. 221).

C. A newer way of expressing this view is to say “I’m spiritual, not religious.” The fact that this saying is gaining some currency suggests that at least a segment of the American population seems to have embraced spirituality either as an alternative to religion or in opposition to religion.

D. In their book, *Shopping for Faith*, Richard Cimino and Don Lattin discuss “the divorce between spirituality and religion” and conclude, “In the new millennium, there will be a growing gap between personal spirituality and religious institutions.” Due to their unique experiences, Baby Boomers are seen as the vanguard of the movement dividing spirituality and religion. Sociologist Wade Clark Roof has called them “a generation of seekers.”

E. What assumptions/beliefs about “Spirituality” and “Religion” are built into this line of thinking? That is, what do people associate with each of these two categories?

SPIRITUALITY	RELIGION

F. How many people are “spiritual, not religious”? For his book, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (1999), Wade Clark Roof conducted a survey of Baby Boomers and asked them (among other things), two questions: (1) Are you religious? (2) Are you spiritual? Here is what he found:

AMONG BABY BOOMERS (b. 1945-1963)		“Are you religious?”	
		Yes	No
“Are you spiritual?”	Yes	33% (Born-again Christians)	14% (Metaphysical believers, spiritual seekers)
		25% (Mainstream believers)	
	No	15% (Dogmatists, fundamentalists)	12% (Secularists)

IV. Spirituality: From Dwelling to Seeking: Rather than looking at spirituality in opposition to religion, in *After Heaven: Spirituality in American since the 1950s*, Robert Wuthnow wants to look at spirituality as a more universal mode of relating to the divine. He argues, “At its core, spirituality consists of all the beliefs and activities by which individuals attempt to relate their lives to God or to a divine being or some other conception of a transcendent reality” (p. viii). Wuthnow further argues that “spirituality is not just the creation of individuals; it is shaped by larger social circumstances and by the beliefs and values present in the wider culture” (p. viii). One way of thinking about this is to see that we construct our spirituality out of the “toolbox” of cultural resources that is available to us at the time we are living. Our spirituality is not dictated to us by our social circumstances, but our social circumstances definitely make certain forms of spirituality more likely than others. This is Wuthnow’s concern: to understand and explain the dominant cultural form of spirituality in American society and how it has changed over time.

A. Dwelling and Seeking as Modes of Spirituality: Wuthnow argues that the dominant cultural model for spirituality has changed from *dwelling* to *seeking*. So, the first task is to summarize and understand the characteristics of each of these modes of spirituality:

The Spirituality of Dwelling	The Spirituality of Seeking

B. From Dwelling to Seeking: Having understood these modes of spirituality, we can then consider the social forces underlying the change from dwelling to seeking as the dominant mode. So, what are the characteristics of the dwelling society, the seeking society, and what significant social changes help explain the movement from one to the other?

Dwelling ----->	Social Change ----->	Seeking

II. "God, Religion, Whatever": The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers

A. The book from which this chapter is taken, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, is based on both a telephone survey and more in-depth face-to-face interviews. The study has a pretty nice web site which includes some reports that are written for general audiences: <http://www.youthandreligion.org/>

1. The 2002-2003 "National Survey of Youth and Religion" is a nationally-representative telephone survey of 3,370 English and Spanish speaking American kids who were between 13-17 years of age (including an oversample of Jewish households), and their parents.

2. The second phase of data collection for the study was in-depth interviews with a representative sample of 267 teens in 45 different states who were part of the original 3,370 in the survey. These interviews ranged from 1.5 to 3 hours, and averaged 2 hours.

B. Born roughly between 1985 and 1989, these teens are part of what has been called the Millennium Generation, Generation Y, or Echo Boomers. They are either the children or the grandchildren of Baby Boomers, and so inherited much of the Boomer culture and values. But like any generation, they also came of age under particular socio-historical circumstances (that is, during a particular period).

1. What were some of the important characteristics of the period during which the Echo Boomers came of age? (Think in contrast to previous generations like the Baby Boomers.)

2. How might we expect this "cohort effect" to affect Echo Boomer religion?

C. The survey asked, do you consider yourself "spiritual but not religious"? The teenagers responded:

Very true:	8%
Somewhat true	46%
Not true at all	43%
Don't know/refused	2%

D. See various other statistics on youth religion in the sections of *Soul Searching* that I made optional. Are American youth spiritual seekers or conventionally religious?

E. Smith argues that American teenagers are not “restless, alienated, rebellious” but are “*exceedingly conventional*” in their faith, “basically content to follow the faith of their families with little questioning” (pp. 119-20).

1. So, is this good news for people who are interested in promoting youth religiosity?

2. How does Smith explain and assess this conventionality?

G. Smith’s overall interpretation of the religion of American youth is:

1. Moralistic =

2. Therapeutic =

3. Deism =

G. Smith’s ultimate conclusion: “It is not so much that U.S. Christianity is being secularized. Rather more subtly, Christianity is either degenerating into a pathetic version of itself or, more significantly, Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith” (p. 171).

H. Recall “Sheila Larson” from *Habits*: “It’s just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think He would want us to take care of each other.” In other words, MORALISTIC (“take care of each other”), THERAPEUTIC (“be gentle with yourself”), DEISM (“He would want”).

1. Question: Do you think that “Sheilism” (or Moralistic, Therapeutic Deism) is the fundamental view of the “appropriate” way to be religious presented by the movie “Saved”?