

BOOK REVIEW

***Back-Pocket God:
Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of Emerging Adults***

by Melinda Lundquist Denton and Richard Flory
New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, 268 pages

Back-Pocket God: Religion and Spirituality in the Lives of Emerging Adults, by Denton (Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Texas at San Antonio) and Flory (senior director of research and evaluation at the Center for Religion and Civic Culture at the University of Southern California), is the fourth and final text to come out of The National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). Spanning from 2002 to 2013, the landmark longitudinal study tracked the religious and spiritual lives of U.S. young people from adolescence to emerging adulthood through four waves of rich survey and interview data. Reporting on the final wave of data collection, *Back-Pocket God* is, in the words of Christian Smith, “the culmination of nearly two decades of sustained collaborative sociological research” and “the flagship book” of the series (xi).

Largely descriptive, the first two chapters revisit teens from the first wave of data collection written up in *Soul Searching* (Smith and Denton 2005). Now displaying most of the key markers of adulthood, the authors report on emerging adult views of family, friends, marriage, parenthood, careers, finances, politics, social institutions, morals, life outlook, and regrets. From this “cultural moment that they are living,” chapters 3 and 4 are data-rich and focus on religious commitment, affiliation, attrition, identity, beliefs, practices, attitudes, and the outlooks of Conservative Protestants, Mainline Protestants, Black Protestants, Catholics, Jewish, Latter-day Saints, Not Religious, Other Religions, and Intermediate emerging adults. While primarily focused on continuity and change in the religious outlook of young people (now 23-28 years old), the story is ultimately one of religious decline in commitment and affiliation, but not without small but vibrant countertrends of religiously committed young adults who are “doubling down” on faith. Based on these findings, in chapter 5, the authors (with Jonathan Hill) highlight factors that led emerging adults to follow one of six religious trajectories to their present location, and emphasize the importance of the reciprocal relationship between religion and family formation as a way to explain the relative stability in religious outlook over the course of the study.

Among the hundreds of important findings, some of the most valuable arise from comparing all four waves of research data. For instance, from wave 1 (ages 13-17) to wave 4 (ages 23-28), Conservative Protestants (-11.5%), Catholics (-11.3%), Mainline Protestants (-5.6%), and Black Protestants (-5%) showed the most decline in religious tradition affiliation,

with Jewish (-0.5%), Other (0.6%), and Latter-day Saints (0.09%) remaining relatively stable, and the “Not Religious” category skyrocketing (+24%). Another chart further breaks down the shifts in religious traditions by showing where individuals moved to over time. For example, 41% of the individuals who identified as Black Protestants in wave 1 did so again in wave 4, with the remainder identifying with a new tradition, specifically, 12% Conservative Protestant, 3% Mainline Protestant, 1% Catholic, 1% Jewish, 0% Latter-day Saints, 16% Not Religious, 3% Other, and 23% Intermediate. Likewise, 46% of those who identified as Conservative Protestants in wave 1 did so again, with the rest finding a new home: 5% Mainline Protestant, 2% Black Protestant, 2% Catholic, 0% Jewish, 0% Latter-day Saints, 24% Not Religious, 1% Other, and 19% Intermediate. Such data not only nuances shifting affiliation, but the keen observer will also note that those who initially identified as Black Protestants were much more likely to join non-Black Conservative Protestant congregations (12%) than the other way around (2%). Such comparisons tangentially contribute to our understanding of multiracial congregations.

In the concluding chapter, the authors synthesize survey and interview data and characterize the general religious worldview of emerging adults. In *Soul Searching*, Smith and Denton described the religion of American teens (13-17) as “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” (MTD), which encompassed the following core beliefs: God created and watches over the world; God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to other people; the main goal in life is to be happy; God does not need to be involved in one’s life other than to resolve problems; and good people go to heaven when they die. In the fourth round of data collection, Denton and Flory find that while much of this MTD outlook has remained the same, “it now exists in a heightened form,” what they call MTD 2.0 (232). That is, they suggest that as a dominant orientation, the God of emerging adults is increasingly personalized, customized, and compartmentalized to their own idiosyncratic needs and desires. They are not opposed to religion in the abstract; they are simply by and large uninterested in it. To the degree that emerging adults do happen to think about God, they tend to conceive of him as a manageable, patient deity who exists much like an app on their smartphone: reassuringly there, but nonetheless stowed in their back-pocket until circumstances necessitate that he be pulled out and accessed for some specific and limited purposes. In this frame, and like a smartphone app, God can be set to give us notifications, switched on or off as desired, deleted if deemed obsolete, and quickly reinstalled in times of crisis.

While some of the broad-stroke findings of *Back-Pocket God* will not be surprising to those familiar with the literature on emerging adults, the book has several novel strengths. For instance, much of what we previously knew about the religious lives of young people was either anecdotal or based on narrow and sometimes methodologically questionable studies. In contrast, the rigor of the longitudinal data from NSYR that undergirds *Back-Pocket God* elevates its findings to a whole new level. A second and related strength is the sophistication with which the data is analyzed and presented. That is, while quantitatively dense at times, the authors

skillfully utilize qualitative data to nuance and enliven the statistical data. Helpful summaries, categories, and numerous tables and charts simplify the enormity of the data making it easier to digest. A final strength is that the authors call into question several popular assumptions about the religious lives of emerging adults. For instance, they challenge earlier characterizations of emerging adults and subsequently introduce new categories. They also show that emerging adults are not generally antagonistic towards organized religion, as is often assumed, but are instead apathetic towards it. In contrast to prevailing narratives, the authors present evidence to suggest that this cohort of emerging adults may not return to religion after they marry and start families in the way that previous cohorts did.

In sum, this capstone text is indispensable for all those with a sociological interest in religion in the U.S landscape and emerging adults. While filling our understanding in so many ways, *Back-Pocket God* simultaneously promotes many new lines of inquiry and questions. The authors recognize this reality and “hope the book begins a conversation about what that potential future may look like as emerging adults take their place as leaders in their religious institutions, communities, and the wider society” (7).

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