NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title On Corrupting the Youth

Author(s) John Gee

Reference *FARMS Review* 22/2 (2010): 195–228.

ISSN 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

Abstract Review of *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (2009), by Christian Smith; and *Forbidden Fruit: Sex and Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers* (2007), by Mark D. Regnerus.

On Corrupting the Youth

John Gee

Review of Christian Smith. *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*. With Patricia Snell. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. viii + 355 pp., with appendixes and index. $24.95 (hardcover).

Review of Mark D. Regnerus. *Forbidden Fruit: Sex and Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. x + 290 pp., with appendixes, bibliography, and index. $29.99 (hardcover).

In 2005 the evangelical sociologist Christian Smith made a small stir when he published the findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR).[1] One of the surprises in his study was how well Latter-day Saint youth came off. "In general comparisons among major U.S. religious traditions using a variety of sociological measures of religious vitality and salience—which, to give a standard sociological disclaimer, may or may not have anything to do with the truth content of religious traditions or their adherents' actual subjective spiritual life and health—it is Mormon teenagers who are sociologically faring the best."[2] While "the majority of U.S. teens would badly fail a hypothetical short-answer or essay test of the basic beliefs of their religion," Latter-day Saint youth "seem somewhat better able

See also the Book Note on Dean, *Almost Christian*, on p. 234 of this volume.

1. Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, with Melinda Lundquist Denton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
2. Smith, *Soul Searching*, 261.

to explain the basic outlook and beliefs of their tradition."[3] Church leaders even mentioned this study in general conference.[4] As part of the NSYR project, one of Smith's colleagues, Mark Regnerus, tackled the issue of adolescents and sexuality.[5] Smith has now done a follow-up study on that same group of youth, now college-aged, whom Smith labels *emerging adults*.[6] The NSYR is similar to studies conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI)[7] but differs because it encompasses all college-aged emerging adults whether or not they attended college, whereas the latter looks only at those involved in higher education. There is much to consider in these thoughtful books, but only a portion can be highlighted here.

Losing Their Faith . . .

Smith's study contains both reasons for concern and reasons to rejoice. If Latter-day Saints stood out positively as teenagers, they stand out more positively and starkly in their college years. One of the more sobering trends among emerging adults is the tendency for them to lose their faith and thus be lost to their faith. Latter-day Saints lose one in ten of their emerging adults, while Protestants lose about one in eight, Catholics lose one in four, and Jews lose a little more than one in four (27 percent).[8] The number of nonreligious individuals almost doubles in the emerging adult years to more than a quarter of the population,[9] which Smith notes is almost twice the number of Baptists,[10] the largest denomination in the United States. Latter-day Saints retain 72 percent of their teens and emerging adults combined, losing just over one in four.[11] This is significantly better than the other

3. Smith, *Soul Searching*, 137.
4. Gordon B. Hinckley, "Gambling," *Ensign*, May 2005, 61.
5. Mark D. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit: Sex and Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
6. Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, with Patricia Snell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
7. This group is part of the University of California, Los Angeles.
8. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 105.
9. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 104–5.
10. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 106–7.
11. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 109.

religious groups, who tend to lose between one in three and one in two.[12] Oddly, in terms of absolute numbers, mainline Protestants stay about the same or make modest gains, but this is because about 10 percent of the more numerous conservative Protestants became mainline Protestants, outweighing the 50 percent of youth who left mainline Protestantism.[13]

The largest increase in any religious category occurred in the nonreligious group, which includes the atheist, the agnostic, and the apathetic. This group nearly doubled in size,[14] accounting for almost a quarter of all emerging adults.[15] Fifteen percent of emerging adults became nonreligious while in that age group.[16] The nonreligious retention rate (if one can use that term) is nearly as high as the Latter-day Saint retention rate.[17] Smith notes that "given its reputation for strong mission evangelism and overall growth, it may be somewhat surprising to some that few non-LDS teenagers switched into the LDS church as they grew into their emerging adult years—only a few out of the entire sample, in fact, converted to LDS from being Jewish and non-religious. Overall growth of LDS, such as it is, must be due to other factors—such as higher fertility rates and conversions among other age groups—since it appears from these data that emerging adults are not disposed to LDS conversion."[18] Throughout the remainder of his book, Smith unknowingly gives numerous reasons why emerging adults are not so disposed. Ironically, the result of evangelical countercult "evangelizing" among Latter-day Saints is that those who do abandon their faith usually become nonreligious rather than evangelical.[19] Rather than adopting evangelical belief, they abandon belief altogether. In this sense evangelical "evangelizing" can result in people ceasing to believe in Christ.

12. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 109.
13. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 109–11.
14. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 105.
15. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 106.
16. Calculated from the information in Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 106, 109.
17. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 109.
18. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 110.
19. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 109.

Besides showing a decline in institutional affiliation, the survey indicates a decline in outward measures of religiosity. More than half of emerging adults do not attend church more than a few times a year.[20] (Of graduating college seniors, 37.2 percent do not attend at all).[21] One in five never pray alone (almost one in four among Latter-day Saints).[22] Almost three in seven graduating college seniors never pray at all,[23] up from almost three in ten entering freshmen.[24] Half never read scriptures (about one in four among Latter-day Saints).[25] Four in five do not observe a Sabbath (about three in ten among Latter-day Saints).[26] Smith observes of religious practices that

> emerging adults who as teenagers were LDS engage in all of these religious practices at the highest level, usually significantly higher than all other groups. They also appear to have increased the most (for positive change) or, conversely, decreased the slightest (for negative change) when change over time is evident in these practices. Second, with the exception of the LDS group, in all but one case—conservative Protestants sharing faith, at 51 percent—only minorities of emerging adults in any category engage in any of these religious practices.[27]

Studies have shown that "having strong religious beliefs—having a strong interior commitment to faith—was not a significant predictor of high engagement in religious practices and activities. Thus habits of the hand (i.e., behaviors) were more significant for many students

20. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 112–13.
21. Ray Franke et al., *Findings from the 2009 Administration of the College Senior Survey (CSS): National Aggregates* (Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, Graduate School of Education and Information Studies, University of California, Los Angeles, 2010), 64.
22. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 116.
23. Franke et al., *College Senior Survey*, 56.
24. Franke et al., *College Senior Survey*, 96.
25. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 116.
26. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 116.
27. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 117–18.

than habits of the heart or head in keeping them connected with spiritual and religious concerns."[28]

Off to College

Emerging adults who attend college mirror this development. A survey of "3,680 students at 50 colleges at the end of their first year revealed that religious involvement (attendance at religious services, participation in religious clubs, prayer and meditation) had declined noticeably over the course of the school year" while the students "expressed more commitment to integrating spirituality into their own lives," indicating "a disturbing disconnect between students' expectations for their lives and reality."[29] All told, "nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of the students indicated that their religious or spiritual beliefs had been strengthened during the freshman year, even though more than 90 percent said their religious activity had decreased to some degree."[30] Although almost four out of five graduating college seniors think it is important to integrate spirituality into their lives,[31] only about one in four attended religious services frequently, and almost two in five never did,[32] and fewer attended religious services by the end of their college careers.[33] The net result of this is a loss of faith. One in fifteen graduating seniors lost their faith in college.[34]

Some of this erosion of emerging adults' faith can be attributed to the attitudes of their professors: "College and university professors on the whole are indeed less religious than other Americans."[35] It is said that 23.4 percent of college professors are atheist or agnostic, as

28. Larry A. Braskamp, "The Religious and Spiritual Journeys of College Students," in *The American University in a Postsecular Age*, ed. Douglas Jacobsen and Rhonda Hustedt Jacobsen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 131.

29. Braskamp, "Religious and Spiritual Journeys," 127.

30. Braskamp, "Religious and Spiritual Journeys," 128.

31. Franke et al., *College Senior Survey*, 71.

32. Franke et al., *College Senior Survey*, 64.

33. Franke et al., *College Senior Survey*, 94.

34. Franke et al., *College Senior Survey*, 91.

35. Neil Gross and Solon Simmons, "The Religious Convictions of College and University Professors," in Jacobsen and Jacobsen, *American University in a Postsecular Age*, 20.

compared to 6.9 percent of the American population as a whole.[36] When one moves to "elite doctoral-granting universities," the percentage of atheists and agnostics rises to more than a third (36.6 percent).[37] While such percentages are for the university as a whole, certain disciplines have higher concentrations: "Psychology and biology have the highest proportion of atheists and agnostics, at about 61 percent. Not far behind is mechanical engineering, where 50 percent of professors are atheists or agnostics. Next in line come economics, political science, and computer science, where about 40 percent of the professors fall into the category of nonbelief."[38] Nevertheless, surveys find that "faculty tend to be very tolerant of most religious groups. . . . There are two exceptions to this tolerance: Mormons and Evangelicals."[39] Thus faculty members tend to have negative feelings toward Latter-day Saints: a third of faculty members dislike Latter-day Saints,[40] but that increases to 42 percent of the humanities faculty.[41] Latter-day Saints are slightly overrepresented on the faculty as compared to the general population.[42] "While believers can indeed be found in the upper echelons of academe, those campuses appear to be places where there is either less interest in or less space for more fervent forms of religiosity."[43] The overwhelming biases of faculty can be seen in other attitudes:

> The proportion of students who believe that marijuana should be legalized (32.3% at college entry vs. 53.4% at the end of senior year), that same-sex couples should have the right to legal marital status (59.3% vs. 72.8%), and/or that abortion should be legal (51.6% vs. 63.8%) all increased by more than ten percentage points between freshman and senior year. Correspondingly, a decrease of nine percentage points was

36. Gross and Simmons, "Religious Convictions," 22–23.
37. Gross and Simmons, "Religious Convictions," 23.
38. Gross and Simmons, "Religious Convictions," 24.
39. Gary A. Tobin and Aryeh K. Weinberg, *Religious Beliefs and Behavior of College Faculty* (San Francisco: Institute for Jewish and Community Research, 2007), 16.
40. Tobin and Weinberg, *Religious Beliefs and Behavior of College Faculty*, 12, 81.
41. Tobin and Weinberg, *Religious Beliefs and Behavior of College Faculty*, 82.
42. Tobin and Weinberg, *Religious Beliefs and Behavior of College Faculty*, 3, 19–20.
43. Gross and Simmons, "Religious Convictions," 26.

> seen among the proportion of students believing that it is important to have laws prohibiting homosexual relationships (23.8% vs. 14.9%).[44]

It is not just the faculty who erode the faith and practice of youth. "In classes and discussions, a small coterie of anti-orthodox skeptics, however, always manages to remain unconvinced, and they often have great difficulty concealing their disdain for any expression of uncompromising orthodox belief."[45] While these students trumpet their tolerance, they will not tolerate orthodoxy. For example, Anatoly Brekhman, a former freshman counselor at Yale, relates: "I had a freshman who came in and said, 'I'm the most pure girl in the entire world. I don't have sex, I don't drink, I don't smoke, I don't do drugs, and I don't eat meat.' And out of those five things, probably four were not true by the end of the first term."[46] Brekhman sees this as a good thing. Whether the parents who are paying through the nose for a student's Ivy League experience appreciate the corruption of their child seems to be irrelevant. Brekhman's "expectation is that you come here and you drop all your limits and you experiment because that's the nature of college."[47] For many on college campuses, orthodoxy, or rather orthopraxy, with its strict limitations on behavior is a threat to such experimentation and cannot be tolerated. Brekhman's attitudes are typical: "most emerging adults are happy with religion so long as it is general and accepting of diversity but are uncomfortable if it is anything else."[48] Smith labels this the "enigma of inclusiveness: that a moral system valuing diversity that begins by valuing everyone's particular differences somehow ends up devaluing any given particular difference."[49]

---

44. Franke et al., *College Senior Survey*, 32–33.

45. Robert J. Nash and DeMethra LaSha Bradley, "The Different Spiritualities of the Students We Teach," in Jacobsen and Jacobsen, *American University in a Postsecular Age*, 138.

46. "Are You Charlotte Simmons?" *Yale Alumni Magazine*, March/April 2005, accessed 1 October 2010, http://www.yalealumnimagazine.com/issues/2005_03/charlotte.html.

47. "Are You Charlotte Simmons?"

48. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 81.

49. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 81.

Another factor to consider here is the biases of the selection system whereby emerging adults are admitted to college in the first place. It has long been suspected that institutions of higher education are biased in favor of black and Hispanic candidates, and recent research demonstrates these biases as well as an overwhelming bias against Asians.[50] But the worst category to be in when it comes to chances for college admission is poor and white.[51] As might be expected, athletes are given overwhelmingly preferential treatment (being admitted more than four times as often as nonathletes),[52] while participants in 4-H clubs, junior ROTC, and Future Farmers of America have their chances of being admitted cut by 60 percent.[53] Even having a part-time job in high school lowers one's chances of admission.[54] By their admission practices, universities signal that they would rather not have hard workers on their campuses. This is ironic since the willingness to work is a key ingredient not only of finishing college and especially graduate school but particularly of doing well. As Russell Nieli notes:

> Most elite universities seem to have little interest in diversifying their student bodies when it comes to the numbers of born-again Christians from the Bible belt, students from Appalachia and other rural and small-town areas, people who have served in the U.S. military, those who have grown up on farms or ranches, Mormons, Pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, lower-middle-class Catholics, working class "white ethnics," social and political conservatives, wheelchair users, married students, married students with children, or older students first starting out in college after raising children or spending several years in the workforce. Students in these categories are often very rare at the more competitive colleges, especially the Ivy League. While these kinds of

50. Thomas J. Espenshade and Alexandria Walton Radford, *No Longer Separate, Not Yet Equal: Race and Class in Elite College Admission and Campus Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 93–99, 112.

51. Espenshade and Radford, *No Longer Separate, Not Yet Equal*, 98.

52. Espenshade and Radford, *No Longer Separate, Not Yet Equal*, 113–14.

53. Espenshade and Radford, *No Longer Separate, Not Yet Equal*, 124, 126.

54. Espenshade and Radford, *No Longer Separate, Not Yet Equal*, 122, 124.

> people would surely add to the diverse viewpoints and life-experiences represented on college campuses, in practice "diversity" on campus is largely a code word for the presence of a substantial proportion of those in the "underrepresented" racial minority groups.[55]

Splashed atop Hilgard Hall on the University of California's Berkeley campus is an ironic proclamation of purpose: "To Rescue for Human Society the Native Values of Rural Life." Yet at Berkeley and other elite universities across America, the native values of rural life are largely unwanted and unwelcome.

Scientism—Worshipping at the Shrine of "Science"

Smith also looks at the tremendous impact that empiricism has had on emerging adults. "Most emerging adults put a lot more weight on the empirical evidence, proof, and verified facts of science than on the claims of religious traditions, which, they believe, ultimately require 'blind faith' to embrace."[56] These emerging adults say, "If you don't have real evidence for religion, then it's far-fetched, there's no good reason to believe it."[57] The widespread adoption of empiricism seems to contradict the general trend for science knowledge to get worse among teenagers.[58] Something else is going on here. The historian Mark Noll observes that "when evangelicals rely on a naive Baconianism, they align themselves with the worst features of the naive positivism that lingers among some of those who worship at the shrine of modern science."[59] Emerging adults of various stripes appear to be adopting "the worst features of the naive positivism" and end up

55. Russell K. Nieli, "How Diversity Punishes Asians, Poor Whites and Lots of Others," accessed 1 October 2010, http://www.mindingthecampus.com/originals/2010/07/how_diversity_punishes_asians.html.

56. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 287.

57. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 158.

58. Mark Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin, 2008), 21–23.

59. Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 198.

worshipping it rather than understanding it or using it as a tool. Such beliefs are naive because those who hold them are unaware of the limitations of science—namely, that although science is an extremely useful tool for answering certain types of questions, there are other questions that science cannot answer. Emerging adults thus think they are being scientific when actually they are not. Rather than following science, they follow what Smith labels "scientism"[60]—a naive gullibility towards science as the ultimate source of all knowledge, denying the uncertainties thereof. The downward trend in science literacy has prompted the Public Broadcasting Service to offer as many science shows for children (*Sid the Science Kid*, *Cyberchase*, *Curious George*, *Dinosaur Train*, *FETCH! with Ruff Ruffman*, *The Cat in the Hat Knows a Lot About That*) as it does literacy shows (*Between the Lions*, *Super Why!*, *Word Girl*, *WordWorld*, *Martha Speaks*, and the now decrepit *Sesame Street*).[61] Whether such programs promote thinking from a scientific or scientistic point of view remains to be seen. One wonders whether those who insist on proofs for religion could actually prove the existence of unseen atoms or whether they are just dogmatically taking the word of others. "Most scientific empiricists, however, openly admit that no evidence could ever be found that would constitute incontrovertible proof for them that there is or is not a God."[62] One would think that the admission of the inability to come up with empirical proof would be an indication that empiricism is the wrong tool to solve the problem, but the practical result is that people talk themselves out of even considering the question. Noteworthy in this respect is that Latter-day Saint emerging adults tend to have a more positive view of the interaction between science and religion.[63]

Smith also surveys the beliefs of various groups[64] and religious experiences.[65] Latter-day Saints are the only group to say that they have

60. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 354.

61. Even preschool books are eight times more literate than *Sesame Street*; see Bauerlein, *Dumbest Generation*, 128–29.

62. Nash and Bradley, "Different Spiritualities," 144.

63. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 138–39.

64. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 118–25.

65. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 125–28.

become significantly more religious over time.[66] Just over a third of Latter-day Saints surveyed (of both genders) have gone on missions.[67]

Cafeteria Religion

Smith analyzes his data in a variety of ways. About 40 percent of emerging adults are indifferent to, disconnected from, or even hostile to religion.[68] Another 30 percent want to pick and chose their beliefs as though religion were some sort of all-you-can-stomach smorgasbord. What they dislike is usually the stances of religion on "sex before marriage, the need for regular religious service attendance, belief in the existence of hell, drinking alcohol, [and] taking drugs."[69] As one emerging adult put it, religion provides "something to fall back on. If this isn't enough, then tweak your religion a bit to fit your needs, or find another religion. It's really pretty simple."[70] This is usually not a particularly fruitful way of enhancing religion: "Potpourri religion is usually not very deep and sustaining; digging shallow wells in a field usually will not produce water."[71]

A Way of Life

In comparing life outcomes, Smith breaks the statistics on intensity lines rather than devotional lines. He classifies emerging adults into the devoted, the regular, the sporadic, and the disengaged.[72] His devoted category, which makes up just 5 percent of emerging adults, is composed of those who attend church weekly, pray at least a few times a week, and read their scriptures at least once or twice a month.[73] This is where Latter-day Saints really skew the picture. Although they comprise just 2.8 percent of Smith's total sample,[74] they account for 21

66. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 126.
67. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 126–27.
68. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 168.
69. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 167.
70. Quoted in Nash and Bradley, "Different Spiritualities," 140.
71. Scotty McLennan, quoted in Braskamp, "Religious and Spiritual Journeys," 133.
72. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 259.
73. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 259.
74. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 104.

percent of the devoted category since 56 percent of Latter-day Saints are "devoted."[75] So Latter-day Saint impact is ten times what their proportion of the population is. The devoted are more likely to get along with their parents,[76] give to charity and volunteer to help others,[77] and interact with others.[78] They are less likely to drink (and particularly less likely to binge drink), smoke, and get into fights.[79] Somewhat surprisingly, they are less likely to be obese[80] and depressed.[81] They are more likely to get more education, be employed, and have less debt.[82]

Getting Drunk

Surveying prospective college graduates, the Higher Education Research Institute reports that "about a third of all respondents indicate that they 'frequently' drank beer (33.4%) and/or wine/liquor (31.5%) in the past year. In terms of heavy episodic drinking, slightly less than half the students report they had not had more than five drinks in a row in the past two weeks (44.7%), though the majority did at least once (55.3%)."[83] The use of alcohol increases with time in college,[84] as does partying in general.[85] When compared to Smith's research, this indicates that college students are slightly less likely to drink than emerging adults generally but more likely to binge drink.[86] Others see the problem as more severe: "Among college students, about 80 percent drink alcohol, about 40 percent binge drink, and about 20 percent binge drink

75. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 304.
76. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 261–62.
77. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 262–63.
78. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 263–64.
79. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 265–66.
80. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 266–67.
81. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 267–68.
82. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 270–71.
83. Franke et al., *College Senior Survey*, 22–23. Similar figures (though smaller and slightly older) are reported in National Institutes of Health, "Screening for Alcohol Use and Alcohol-Related Problems," *Alcohol Alert* 65 (April 2005): 6. This suggests that the problem is getting worse.
84. Franke et al., *College Senior Survey*, 94.
85. Franke et al., *College Senior Survey*, 95.
86. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 265.

three or more times within a 2-week period."[87] Binge drinking may be more prevalent among adolescents than older adults: "Because human adolescents may be less sensitive than adults to certain aversive effects of alcohol, they may be at higher risk for consuming more drinks per drinking occasion."[88] Adults tend to suffer more of the immediate adverse effects of binge drinking than adolescents do.[89] This does not mean that adolescents and emerging adults do not suffer negative consequences: "These consequences include risky sexual behavior; physical and sexual assaults; potential effects on the developing brain; problems in school, at work, and with the legal system; various types of injury; car crashes; homicide and suicide; and death from alcohol poisoning."[90] Over half of those of college age who binge drink suffer from blackouts.[91] Those who habitually binge drink also suffer brain damage that reduces their brain's capacity 10 percent (like going from an A to a B).[92] Not to worry—grade inflation means that 85 percent of college students get As and Bs anyway,[93] and consequently 80 percent of college students think they are academically above average,[94] even though 88 percent of

87. National Institutes of Health, "Underage Drinking—Highlights from the Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Reduce Underage Drinking," *Alcohol Alert* 73 (October 2007): 2.

88. National Institutes of Health, "A Developmental Perspective on Underage Alcohol Use," *Alcohol Alert* 78 (July 2009): 2.

89. National Institutes of Health, "Developmental Perspective on Underage Alcohol Use," 2.

90. National Institutes of Health, "Underage Drinking," 2.

91. National Institutes of Health, "Alcohol's Damaging Effect on the Brain," *Alcohol Alert* 63 (October 2004): 1–2.

92. According to Susan Tapert, cited in Michelle Trudeau, "Teen Drinking May Cause Irreversible Brain Damage," accessed 1 October 2010, http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=122765890.

93. Franke et al., *College Senior Survey*, 91.

94. Franke et al., *College Senior Survey*, 97. The tables on pp. 97–99 show that less than half think they are above average in artistic and mathematical ability; about half think they are above average in computer skills, physical health, and public speaking ability; and more than half think that they are above average in cooperativeness, creativity, drive to achieve, emotional health, leadership ability, self-confidence, self-understanding, understanding of others, and writing ability. This suggests that their estimation of their mathematical ability might be about right, but they might be otherwise overconfident.

them spend fewer than twenty hours a week studying and 55 percent of them spend fewer than ten.[95] College has become Lake Wobegon.

"The Ruthless War of Promiscuity"

There is a strong correlation between sexual activity and religiosity,[96] so much so that the NYSR devoted an entire book to religiosity and sexuality.[97] The book correctly notes that Latter-day Saints, as opposed to other religions, emphasize sexual purity, define it clearly, and have methods of institutional accountability concerning it.[98] Latter-day Saints "outpace evangelicals in terms of the organization of sexual social control."[99] Religiously devoted emerging adults tend to be involved in sexual activity later, less frequently out of wedlock, and less promiscuously. They are less involved in pornography and cohabitation.[100] The causality works both ways: On the one hand, "we have every reason to believe that the higher religious commitment of the most religious emerging adults causally reduces the amount of alcohol they consume and the sex in which they engage."[101] On the other hand, Smith observes of emerging adults that

> most of them want to party, to hook up, to have sex in relationships, and to cohabit; or if they do not do these things now, many at least want to keep them as options for the future. . . . Many want to have sex with a boyfriend or girlfriend, or to at least be free to do so if the occasion arises, and many want to be able to hook up with someone they meet to whom they may feel attracted. Many also want to cohabit with current or future serious partners or fiancés before getting married. And all of this, emerging adults are aware, contradicts the teachings of

95. Franke et al., *College Senior Survey*, 95.

96. Lauren Olsho et al., *National Survey of Adolescents and Their Parents: Attitudes and Opinions about Sex and Abstinence* (Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates, 2010), 66–69.

97. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*.

98. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 23.

99. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 23.

100. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 271–75.

101. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 277; compare Olsho et al., *National Survey of Adolescents and Their Parents*, x.

> most religions. So they simply avoid religion and thereby resolve the conflict. . . . Framed as a social-psychological causal mechanism: most emerging adults reduce a certain cognitive dissonance they feel—arising from the conflict of religious teachings against partying and sex before marriage versus their wanting to engage in those behaviors—by mentally discounting the religious teachings and socially distancing themselves from the source of those teachings. In this simple way, the role of sex, drinking, and sometimes drugs is often important in forming emerging adults' frequent lack of interest in religious faith and practice.[102]

Emerging adults who live a more or less hedonistic life do not want to think about religion. As one put it: "If I think about that stuff too much I'm gonna be miserable."[103] "For many youth, therefore, initiating sexual activity is a significant turning point in pulling away from religion, in part because of the mental and emotional dissonance that willfully having sex on an ongoing basis causes in the religious contexts of their lives, even when nobody religious knows they are having sex."[104] There are other consequences as well. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention reports that "nearly 65 percent of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) appear in people who are under 25 years of age and more than 20 percent of all AIDS cases are among college age young people."[105] The groups of most concern to the Center for Disease Control are (1) women and infants, because they "disproportionately bear the long term consequences of STDs";[106] (2) adolescents and young adults, because "sexually-active adolescents 15 to 19 years of age and young adults 20 to 24 years of age are at higher risk for

102. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 83–84; compare Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 53–54.

103. Quoted in Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 36.

104. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 240.

105. Janice Shaw Crouse, "Cohabitation: Consequences for Mothers, Children, and Society," in *The Family in the New Millennium*, ed. A. Scott Loveless and Thomas B. Holman (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 1:355.

106. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance, 2008* (Atlanta, GA: U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 2009), 51.

acquiring STDs";[107] (3) racial and ethnic minorities, because "surveillance data show higher rates of reported STDs among some minority racial or ethnic groups";[108] (4) men who have sex with men,[109] because limited data[110] suggests that "some STDs in men who have sex with men, including men who have sex with both women and men (MSM), are increasing";[111] and (5) individuals entering correctional facilities, because there is "a high prevalence of STDs in persons entering jails and juvenile corrections facilities."[112] The current rates for STDs among adolescents and young adults are of some concern,[113] even if dwarfed by the rates among men who have sex with men.

Regnerus presents data indicating that "there are perceptible linear associations between all same-sex measures (except bisexual identity) and the two religiosity measures (church attendance and importance of religion)."[114] Thus "there is simply very little evidence of same-sex *anything* among the most religious boys," while "the catego-

107. Centers for Disease Control, *Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance, 2008*, 59.

108. Centers for Disease Control, *Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance, 2008*, 65.

109. The Centers for Disease Control uses this term ("men who have sex with men," or MSM) because the terms *homosexual* and *gay* are subjective and because, contrary to popular stereotypes, MSM often do not have sex exclusively with men.

110. "With the exception of reported syphilis cases, most nationally notifiable STD surveillance data do not include information on sexual behaviors; therefore, national trends in STDs among MSM in the United States are not currently available. Furthermore, testing strategies are often suboptimal for detecting STDs in MSM." So this handicaps research in this area. Centers for Disease Control, *Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance, 2008*, 73.

111. Centers for Disease Control, *Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance, 2008*, 73. The measured rates for 2008 are extremely high: 17 percent have gonorrhea; 7 percent have chlamydia; 11 percent have syphilis, and 3 percent have HIV. Centers for Disease Control, *Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance, 2008*, 73–74. These levels are far worse than the rates among teenagers and young adults.

112. Centers for Disease Control, *Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance, 2008*, 81.

113. Centers for Disease Control, *Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance, 2008*, 59–60, 106. The rates among adolescents (15–19 years old) are 2 percent with chlamydia and 0.45 percent with gonorrhea. Among young adults (20–24 years old) the rates are 2.1 percent with chlamydia and 0.51 percent with gonorrhea. "Men in the 20 to 24 year old age group had the highest rate of syphilis, 17.3 cases per 100,000 population in 2008." Centers for Disease Control, *Sexually Transmitted Disease Surveillance, 2008*, 60. The rate among MSM is more than six hundred times as high.

114. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 77–78.

ries 'no religion' and 'other religion' tend to exhibit the highest percentages in most of the same-sex outcomes."[115] Since nationally "only 2.3 percent of all men and 1.3 percent of all women . . . self-identify as homosexual,"[116] there is little reason to assume that the percentages among Latter-day Saints exceed those figures. Regnerus suggests that the data should be taken as an indication of self-selection: "Youth who experience same-sex attraction or wish to identify themselves as something besides heterosexual likely self-select away from extensive religious participation."[117] The data, however, can also be read as indicating that the more religious the upbringing, the more likely it is for a youth to be heterosexual. Such an explanation, however, is usually discounted.[118] As Professor Camille Paglia, herself a lesbian, observes:

> After the American Psychiatric Association, responding to activist pressure, removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders in 1973, psychological inquiries into homosexuality slowly became verboten. To even ask about the origins of homosexuality was automatically dubbed homophobic by gay studies proponents in the '80s and '90s. Weirdly, despite the rigid social constructionist bias that permeated the entire left, gay activists in and out of academe now leapt on the slightest evidence that could suggest a biological cause of homosexuality. . . . Yet the intricate family dynamic of every single gay person I've ever known seems to have played some kind of role in his or her developing sexual orientation.

115. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 78, emphasis in original.

116. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 77.

117. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 78.

118. See, for example, the debate: Paul Cameron, "Children of Homosexuals and Transsexuals More Apt to Be Homosexual," *Journal of Biosocial Science* 38/3 (2005): 413–18; Todd G. Morrison, "Children of Homosexuals and Transsexuals More Apt to Be Homosexual: A Reply to Cameron," *Journal of Biosocial Science* 39/1 (2006): 153–54; Paul Cameron, "Facts, Not Opinions, Drive Science: A Reply to Morrison," *Journal of Biosocial Science* 39/1 (2007): 155–56; Walter R. Schumm, "Children of Homosexuals More Apt to Be Homosexuals? A Reply to Morrison and Cameron based on an Examination of Multiple Sources of Data," *Journal of Biosocial Science* 42/6 (2010): 721–42. I note that Cameron had previously been expelled from the American Psychological Association.

> The widespread desire to find a biological basis for homosexuality seems to me very misconceived. It will inevitably lead to claims that gays are developmentally defective at the prenatal level. I myself believe . . . that exclusive homosexuality is an adaptation to specific social conditions. When a gay adult claims to have been gay since early childhood, what he or she is actually remembering is the sense of being different for some reason, which in boys often registers as shyness or super-sensitivity, leading to a failure to bond with bumptious peers. This disjunction, with all its painfully stifled longings, becomes overt homosexuality much later on. But retrospective psychohistory is out these days, and the only game in town is pin the tail on the oppressor.[119]

It is not clear that it is helpful to stereotype how any individual may have come under the MSM classification.

For adolescents and emerging adults, the initiation of sexual experiences usually leads to promiscuity that sometimes settles into longer-term liaisons. Emerging adults view this as a possible prelude to marriage. Many emerging adults "maintained with complete assurance that one would be stupid to get married without first having lived together for six months to a year. . . . By cohabiting for the good part of a year, one is able to 'test drive' the relationship and confirm before it is too late that the marriage really will work."[120] This is a fantasy; the reality is something different. "None of the emerging adults who are enthusiastic about cohabiting as a means to prevent unsuccessful marriages seem aware that nearly all studies consistently show that couples who live together before they marry are more, not less, likely to later divorce than couples who did not live together before their weddings."[121] Cohabitation significantly increases the risk of divorce. "The divorce rates of women who cohabit are nearly 80 percent higher

119. Camille Paglia, "Obama's early stumbles," 14 January 2009, accessed 1 October 2010, http://www.salon.com/news/opinion/camille_paglia/2009/01/14/obama/index.html.

120. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 62.

121. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 63.

than the rates of those who do not."[122] "In fact, either something about living together before marriage itself or the very notion of approaching marriage with the mentality of hedging one's bets by shaking out the relationship with a provisional uncommitted marriage-like test, or both, significantly increases the probability of subsequently divorcing. But emergent adults are oblivious to these facts."[123] For example:

> One college professor described a survey that he had conducted over a period of years in his marriage classes. He asked guys who were living with a girl, point blank, "Are you going to marry the girl that you're living with?" The overwhelming response, he reports, was "NO!" When he asked the girls if they were going to marry the guy they were living with, their response was, "Oh, Yes!" The professor asked "Why?" The girls usually replied, "Because we love each other and we are learning how to be together." The guys, however, explained that they would not marry the girl they were living with because, "She was easy for me. How can I trust her to be faithful in marriage?"[124]

They have a reason for their lack of trust. "Not surprisingly, partners in a cohabiting relationship are more likely to be unfaithful to each other than married couples: . . . men in cohabiting relationships were 4 times more likely to be unfaithful than husbands and . . . women in cohabiting relationships were 8 times more likely to cheat than wives."[125] "It appears," notes Smith wryly, "that emerging adult females have somewhat more investment than their male peers in getting clear on the nature of their relationships."[126]

The ones who really suffer in cohabitation, however, are the children. "Older children (6 to 11 years of age) exhibited the highest number of behavioral problems living in cohabiting-partner households (16.4 percent); cohabiting-parent households were next highest at 14 percent

122. Crouse, "Cohabitation," 353.
123. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 63.
124. Crouse, "Cohabitation," 353.
125. Crouse, "Cohabitation," 353.
126. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 59.

with single parent households at 9.0 percent as compared with only 3.5 percent among those living with married parents. For teens, the situation is similar."[127] Behavior is not the only problem; poverty is also a factor: "In the mid-1990s, the poverty rate for children in cohabiting households was 31 percent, whereas that for children living in married couple families was about 6 percent."[128] More tragic still are the rates of abuse. "Women are 62 times more likely to be assaulted by their live-in boyfriends than they are if living with their husband."[129] "Rates for serious abuse of children are lowest in the intact family, six times higher in stepfamilies, 14 times higher in the always-single-mother family, 20 times higher in cohabiting biological parent families, and an astonishing 33 times higher when the mother is cohabiting with a boyfriend."[130] Even moving in together is no longer necessarily the case. Smith notes that "cohabiting does not always take the 'standard' form of two people deciding to move into a new apartment together—rather, some simply spend every weekend living together when one is away at college but otherwise live separate lives; and others basically move into the house where the boyfriend or girlfriend is still living with a parent or parents, simply sleeping in the friend's bedroom, hanging out, and coming and going as they please."[131]

How might we estimate the number of Latter-day Saint emerging adults involved in cohabitation? "Mormon youths are unlikely to have sex before age 18 in the first place, but if they *do* have sex, they're more likely to try it once and then refrain from further sexual activity."[132] Less than 6 percent qualify as promiscuous,[133] so one would expect the number to be less than 6 percent. These statistics, however, refer to adolescents, who are less likely to cohabitate than emerging adults. Since Smith does not break his cohabitation statistics by denominational lines, we can arrive at only a rough guess by

127. Crouse, "Cohabitation," 351.
128. Crouse, "Cohabitation," 354.
129. Crouse, "Cohabitation," 357.
130. Crouse, "Cohabitation," 357.
131. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 59.
132. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 132–33.
133. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 133.

multiplying the percentages of Latter-day Saints in each category[134] by the percentage of each category that involves cohabitation[135] and add the totals. The result is 9 percent, but the figure is only a rough guess; it is the expected number, not the actual one. If one includes results across all age spectra, then 3 percent of Latter-day Saint emerging adults cohabit.[136]

Colleges and universities tend to ignore this sort of information. For example, Yale college associate dean John Meeske rationalized when announcing that Yale would allow members of the opposite sex in its coed dorms to share the same bedroom suites: "'The story I kept getting,' says Meeske, 'was it was just a non-issue. People anticipated there would be problems, but they didn't materialize.'"[137] Meeske appears to have gotten most of his information from administrators at other colleges who probably do not want to admit that there have been any problems with their experiments. Although social scientists have noted that "the emotional pain that lingers after poor sexual decision making, at any age, is evidence of the complex morality inherent to human sexuality,"[138] one does not need to be a social scientist to notice that, merely a thoughtful observer of humans. The individual accounts provided are heartrending.[139]

This highlights another trend appearing among sexually active emerging adults. Although "they clearly do not want to see themselves as having regrets," they appear to "harbor regrets about the past even when they deny that they do."[140] "Sex simply does not come without emotional strings for the majority of American adolescents, especially girls."[141] And so "many adolescents do a good deal of mental labor and normative affirmation in order to convince each other that coupled

134. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 304.

135. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 272.

136. According to the Pew Forum U.S. Religious Landscape Survey 2010, accessed 11 October 2010, http://religions.pewforum.org/portraits#9.

137. David Zax, "Co-ed Suites Now an Option for Seniors," *Yale Alumni Magazine* 73/5 (May/June 2010): 17.

138. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 211.

139. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 26–40.

140. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 41.

141. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 41.

sexual activity during adolescence—a period of relational instability and immaturity—is, in fact, a good idea. Arousal may come naturally during adolescent development, but sexual happiness does not."[142] Breakups among the sexually active are devastating:

> These splits are not your run-of-the-mill middle school and high school breakups that sweep the local rumor mill, create lots of drama, and leave somebody crying for a few days. The breakups that many emerging adults recounted instead sounded much more serious. They often happened in the context of couples living together or semicohabiting and, in any case, being sexually involved. They often resulted in serious emotional and physical distress—dumped partners told tales of days spent sleeping and crying or lying in bed debilitated with depression, of anguish suffered at being cheated on or otherwise betrayed, of profound struggles with self-doubt, self-criticism, and hopelessness lasting for months, of uncertainty about being able to trust another man or woman whom they might love in the future. . . . Their accounts suggested the experience of getting a hard divorce without ever even having gotten married.[143]

Yale, or any other school that would maintain that such problems will not materialize, is simply sticking its head in the sand.

To its credit, "after more than a quarter century of debate, Yale faculty members are now barred from sexual relationships with undergraduates—not just their own students, but any Yale undergrads."[144] As one of the faculty correctly reasoned: "It really is kind of simple. Parents don't send their kids to Yale to sleep with their professors. Why don't we say that?"[145] Yale has received much criticism for taking this stance.[146] But no penalty was mentioned in the news report, and the faculty handbook merely says that violations will be "resolved in-

142. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 41.

143. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 61–62.

144. Carole Bass, "University bans faculty-student sex," *Yale Alumni Magazine*, March/April 2010, 15.

145. Bass, "University bans faculty-student sex," 15.

146. For example, Fred Graf, letter to the editor, *Yale Alumni Magazine*, May/June 2010, 4. The commentary on the Internet is much more strident.

formally" and might lead to some unspecified "disciplinary action."[147] It is well known that the previous ban on sex between students and faculty in a direct supervisory role was not enforced. As one alumnus observed: "What kind of message does it send to Yale alumni, students, and most especially parents? ('Yes, our professors have taken your children to bed for decades, it was just good fun.')"[148] Yale seems to have forgotten that the reason so many campuses and workplaces have sexual harassment policies is that multiple complaints of sexual harassment of Yale students by Yale faculty resulted in a lawsuit: *Alexander vs. Yale University.*

Half a century ago, C. S. Lewis ended his last published work with the following observation, which still seems relevant:

> A society in which conjugal infidelity is tolerated must always be in the long run a society adverse to women. Women, whatever a few male songs and satires may say to the contrary, are more naturally monogamous than men; it is a biological necessity. Where promiscuity prevails they will therefore always be more often the victims than the culprits. Also, domestic happiness is more necessary to them than to us. And the quality by which they most easily hold a man, their beauty, decreases every year after they have come to maturity, but this does not happen to those qualities of personality—women don't really care twopence about our looks—by which we hold women. Thus in the ruthless war of promiscuity women are at a double disadvantage. They play for higher stakes and are also more likely to lose.[149]

Winning the Culture Wars

Earlier Smith suggested that "the de facto dominant religion among contemporary U.S. teenagers is what we might well call

147. *Yale University Faculty Handbook* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2010), 156.
148. Barry Lenson, letter to the editor, *Yale Alumni Magazine*, July/August 2010, 8.
149. C. S. Lewis, "We Have No 'Right to Happiness,'" *Saturday Evening Post*, 21–28 December 1963, 12.

'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,'"[150] which has several facets: "First, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is about inculcating a moralistic approach to life. It teaches that central to living a good and happy life is being a good, moral person. That means being nice, kind, pleasant, respectful, responsible, at work on self-improvement, taking care of one's health, and doing one's best to be successful."[151] It does not seem to include such moral traits as honesty, chastity, and fidelity. "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is, second, about providing therapeutic benefits to its adherents. . . . [It] is centrally about feeling good, happy, secure, at peace. It is about attaining subjective well-being, being able to resolve problems, and getting along amiably with other people."[152] As long as one's self-esteem is "healthy" and high, everything is fine. "Finally, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is about belief in a particular kind of God: one who exists, created the world, and defines our general moral order, but not one who is particularly personally involved in one's affairs—especially affairs in which one would prefer not to have God involved."[153] Such views are "particularly evident among mainline Protestant and Catholic youth, but . . . also visible among black and conservative Protestants, Jewish teens, other religious types of teenagers, and even many non-religious teenagers in the United States."[154] In their view, "God is not demanding. He actually can't be, because his job is to solve our problems and make people feel good. In short, God is something like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist: he is always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, professionally helps his people feel better about themselves, and does not become too personally involved in the process."[155]

After five years, Smith concludes that Moralistic Therapeutic Deism "is still alive and well among 18- to 23-year-old American youth," but in a somewhat diluted form.[156] "Confronted with real

150. Smith, *Soul Searching*, 162.
151. Smith, *Soul Searching*, 163.
152. Smith, *Soul Searching*, 163–64.
153. Smith, *Soul Searching*, 164.
154. Smith, *Soul Searching*, 163.
155. Smith, *Soul Searching*, 165.
156. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 155.

existential or material difficulties, some emerging adults appear to have backed away from the simple verities of MTD or perhaps have moved forward into somewhat more complex, grounded, or traditional versions of religious faith. In short, there seem to be certain tests in life through which some youth find that MTD proves an unrealistic account or an unhelpful way to respond."[157]

In the new survey, Smith notes that "individual autonomy, unbounded tolerance, freedom from authorities, the affirmation of pluralism, the centrality of human self-consciousness, the practical value of moral religion, epistemological skepticism, and an instinctive aversion to anything 'dogmatic' or committed to particulars were routinely taken for granted by respondents."[158] He observes that "most Catholic and Jewish emerging adults, for example, talked very much like classical liberal Protestants."[159] So he comes to the surprising conclusion that what appears to be one of the bigger losers in the culture wars is actually one of the big winners: "Liberal Protestantism's organizational decline has been accompanied by and is in part arguably the consequence of the fact that liberal Protestantism has won a decisive, larger cultural victory.[160] "A historical nemesis of evangelicalism, liberal Protestantism, can afford to be losing its organizational battles now precisely because long ago it effectively won the bigger, more important struggle over culture."[161] One way of telling this is that "mainline Protestants simply experience less of a cultural conflict about religion and contemporary life. There is no battle, nor even a collision."[162] As a consequence,

> liberal Protestantism's core values—individualism, pluralism, emancipation, tolerance, free critical inquiry, and the authority of human experience—have come to so permeate broader American culture that its own churches as organizations have

157. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 155.
158. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 288.
159. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 288.
160. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 287.
161. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 289.
162. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 159.

> difficulty surviving. One reason for this development is that these very liberal values have a tendency to undermine organizational vitality. The strongest organizations are generally not built on individualism, diversity, autonomy, and criticism.[163]

This might also explain some university departments.

Nevertheless, Smith also notes other trends at work. Conservative Protestantism, numerically the largest religious tradition, has had an unavoidable influence. "It is the centuries-old, central evangelical insistence on the ultimate consequence of each individual's salvation in standing alone before a holy God that emerging adults are resonating when they articulate their radically individualistic view of religious faith and practice."[164] This radical individualism appears "when emerging adults say that religion is really a personal affair that is sullied by the restrictions and artificialities of social institutions, including religious institutions."[165] Another evangelical observer notes that "individualism is pervasive in the evangelical world. . . . Independent congregations are accountable to no one but themselves. Independent evangelical parachurch organizations have almost no accountability to the larger church. Dominant 'successful' senior pastors can do almost anything they please."[166] He warns his fellow evangelicals of the dangers of this trend: "An exclusive emphasis on personal, individualistic approaches without a parallel concern for structural causes and solutions is wrong at several points: it contradicts our present political activity, it ignores our past success in changing structures, it is inconsistent with the biblical understanding of persons, and it totally ignores the biblical teaching of social sin."[167] Another evangelical observer agrees: "Evangelicalism is a many-splintered thing with more denominational expressions than one can count, and like much of the rest of the church is to a large extent biblically illiterate or semi-

163. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 288.

164. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 290.

165. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 290.

166. Ronald J. Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 92.

167. Sider, *Evangelical Conscience*, 76.

literate."[168] Smith may be overstating the case here. Certainly evangelicalism has a strong individualistic streak, and other evangelicals may agree with him that it is too strong, but this individualistic streak is reinforced in popular culture by trends coming from the enlightenment, libertarianism, atheists, and the bohemian artistic communities that produce much of the mass media, not to mention simple human selfishness. Laying the individualism in popular culture solely at the feet of evangelicals is overstating the case.

Evangelical individualism impacts the popular culture in another way. "The strong individualistic subjectivism in the emerging adult religious outlook—that 'truth' should be decided by 'what seems right' to individuals, based on their personal experience and feelings—also has deep cultural-structural roots in American evangelicalism."[169] But some evangelicals are noticing that this propensity has a downside. An evangelical pastor reported that he would conclude an extensive catechetical class for teenagers by asking them an important question about Jesus Christ. For six years he received the same response from every pupil—that "the deity and resurrection of Christ are . . . mere matters of personal opinion."[170] The scientific notion that every valid observation should theoretically be independently verifiable, particularly the scientistic versions of this, also plays a role.

"Finally, contemporary emerging adults' positive valuation of religion primarily because of the practical benefits it bestows on individual lives in the form of moral behaviors also has cultural roots in American evangelicalism."[171] Smith previously warned that

> communities of faith would also do well, we think, to become more aware that a primarily instrumentalist view of faith is a double-edged sword. For many parents, religious congregations are good and valuable because they produce good outcomes in their children. . . . But making this into religion's key

168. Ben Witherington III, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005), ix.

169. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 290.

170. Sider, *Evangelical Conscience*, 91.

171. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 291.

> legitimating focus easily degenerates into a church-is-good-because-it-will-help-keep-my-kid-off-drugs-and-increase-their-seatbelt-use mentality. This obviously undermines larger and deeper questions of truth, tradition, discipleship, and peoplehood that matter to communities of faith.[172]

Taking a purely instrumentalist approach shows a distinct lack of faith. "Pretending to value religion—or treating it with this sort of instrumentalism—is an insult to people of faith."[173] As one political philosopher and intellectual historian explains: "When the content of faith is seen as merely salutary—a kind of noble lie or a soothing, controlling, or even necessary *pharmakon*—even its obvious usefulness is thereby radically compromised. For the myth to work its wonders, it cannot be considered merely salutary but must be seen simply as true. So the utility argument surrenders much of its utility, and hence its attractiveness, when it becomes the locus of loyalty and is thereby known for what it is."[174]

Thus popular religious notions among emerging adults tend to combine the worst traits from liberal Protestantism, evangelicalism, and scientism. These trends appear in the current crop of critics of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that lurk and smirk on message boards or blather on blogs. Many use the anonymity of the Internet to mask their hypocrisy or because they lack the courage of their convictions and are unwilling to take responsibility for their actions. Puffed up for years on overinflated grades and the notion that they themselves are worthy of esteem without having accomplished anything (as if they had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for merely not being George Bush), they insist on the primacy of their own intellect no matter how woeful that may be. "Unconvinced of what adult readers feel deep in their hearts and know from long experience, nearly half of the student body disregards books by choice

172. Smith, *Soul Searching*, 270.

173. Arthur C. Brooks, *Who Really Cares* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 181.

174. Louis Midgley, "The Utility of Faith Reconsidered," in *Revelation, Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 179.

and disposition, and they don't expect to suffer for it. In their minds, a-literacy and anti-intellectualism pose no career obstacles, and they have no shame attached."[175] No need for hard study and years of labor, two paragraphs from Wikipedia make them master of even the most abstruse fields. Studies may show that most of them misinterpret what they find on the Internet, and seven out of eight cannot construct a coherent argument,[176] but this is no deterrence. They insist on empirical proof but refuse to consider any evidence that runs counter to their dogma. They insist on tolerance for their own views but not those of others. They thrive on criticism, but not any directed at themselves, since to deal with challenging arguments and points of view "intelligently, the intellectual tool kit must expand and attitudes must soften. If the first apprehension stalls, you can't mutter, 'I don't get it—this isn't for me.' You have to say, 'I don't get it, and maybe that's *my* fault.' You have to accept the sting of relinquishing a cherished notion, of admitting a defect in yourself."[177] From years of elementary and secondary schools promoting self-esteem, two-thirds of college students reach above-average levels on the narcissism scale.[178] "One consequence of narcissism is that it prevents young people from weighing their own talents and competencies accurately. Narcissists can't take criticism, they hate to hand power over to others, and they turn disappointments into the world's fault, not their own. . . . Education requires the opposite, a modicum of self-doubt, a capacity for self-criticism, precisely what the narcissist can't bear."[179] Thus among the youth there is "a curious inverse correlation" between confidence and competence. "Optimism is nice, but not when it reaches delusional limits."[180] Given the evidence in Smith's book, we can expect these trends to continue.

175. Bauerlein, *Dumbest Generation*, 53.
176. Bauerlein, *Dumbest Generation*, 113–15.
177. Bauerlein, *Dumbest Generation*, 138.
178. Bauerlein, *Dumbest Generation*, 192.
179. Bauerlein, *Dumbest Generation*, 192–93.
180. Bauerlein, *Dumbest Generation*, 195–96.

An Evangelical Focus

The authors of the books under review, Christian Smith and Mark Regnerus, are both evangelicals. Smith at least makes it sound as though the NSYR project was started as a way of checking out evangelical literature designed to scare evangelicals by making them think their children were becoming Satan worshippers. Regnerus was clearly concerned with evaluating how well evangelical programs such as "True Love Waits" work. They deserve much thanks for their gathering and analysis of the data. The target audience for their work is evangelicals, which is only fair considering both their own evangelical backgrounds and the fact that evangelical Christians are currently the largest religious group in the United States. Regrettably, this evangelical focus sometimes prevents them from asking some interesting questions.

Consider for a moment those places where Latter-day Saints are outliers in Regnerus's study of the influence of religion on adolescent behavior. Latter-day Saint youth are outliers in the following areas: They are the most likely to be virgins (87.4 percent),[181] to have the highest mean age of sexual debut (18.0 years),[182] and to not be in a hurry to have sex (72.5 percent);[183] the second least likely to have sex even though they would like to (14.9 percent, after evangelical protestants at 14.3 percent);[184] the least likely to use pornography (6.2 percent);[185] the least likely to engage in oral sex;[186] the most likely to have had sex only once (7.0 percent);[187] the least likely to have continuing sex with one partner outside of marriage (0 percent); and the least likely to

181. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 123.

182. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 127.

183. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 133.

184. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 133.

185. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 176; but note p. 175: "Evangelicals, Mormons, and youths who identify with another (non-Christian) religion display the lowest stated rates of pornography use here, though these numbers may be artificially low due to stronger than average social desirability bias."

186. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 169. Many American teenagers do not consider oral sex to be sex. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 30. This is a cultural perception since ancient Romans considered it to be worse than intercourse.

187. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 133.

have multiple sex partners (5.6 percent).[188] These last numbers are significant because "solitary instances of sexual intercourse are unusual. Instead, virginity loss tends to commence a pattern of paired sexual activity, most commonly with more than one partner."[189] Latter-day Saint youth who break the law of chastity are the most likely to use birth control the first time they have sex (91.8 percent)[190] and the least likely to think that others would think they are promiscuous if they use birth control (8.6 percent).[191] These are generally seen as positive outcomes. What could account for them? Could it be in the attitudes of Latter-day Saints? They are the most likely to support waiting until marriage for sex (77.3 percent);[192] least likely to think that having sex would make them respected (2.2 percent) or attractive (6.1 percent); and the most likely to think they would feel guilty (77.1 percent), upset their mothers (96.4 percent),[193] and make their parents "extremely mad" if they had sex (79.7 percent).[194]

Preoccupied with evangelicals, Regnerus does not explore why Latter-day Saints are the outliers in these statistics. It is not clear that the surveys on which he relies for his data have asked the questions that would lead to insightful answers in this area.

Although parents talking to youth about sex is generally thought to improve outcomes, Latter-day Saint parents do not generally stand out from the crowd in this regard[195] except in two areas: They are the second most likely to find it very difficult to talk with their children about the subject (29.1 percent, just under the 29.5 percent of mainline Protestants),[196] and they are the most likely not to talk about birth control at all with their children (21.4 percent).[197] (This is ironic considering the statistic cited above that Latter-day Saints who break the law

188. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 133.
189. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 161.
190. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 143.
191. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 141.
192. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 87.
193. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 104.
194. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 87.
195. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 64–69.
196. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 66.
197. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 65.

of chastity are most likely to use birth control.) Not discussing birth control may be of slight significance since, as Regnerus notes, children whose parents talk "a great deal" about birth control are more likely to become sexually active.[198] But "talking about birth control is *not* as powerful an influence on subsequent virginity loss as the number of recent dating partners or the age of the child."[199] Regnerus observes that less-religious parents are clearer on the distinction between talking about mechanics and talking about values. "When devoutly religious parents say they are talking regularly with their adolescents about sex and birth control, it means they are talking with them about morality rather than sharing information."[200] For them, "talk about sex *is* talk about values," not mechanics.[201] Regnerus suggests as an antidote that parents should talk more with their children: "We owe our children a more comprehensive sex education—moral advocacy *and* information—than most of them are getting. . . . Mothers and fathers have the power—and, I would argue, the responsibility—to break any legacies of secrecy about sex, to resist sexual double standards, to both instruct their adolescents about the beauty, pleasures, and complexities of sex and human anatomy *as well as* pass on to them their own moral assertions about sexual boundaries."[202] Although Regnerus is strongly in favor of parents talking to their children about such matters, his findings are not particularly encouraging about the effect of talking with adolescents about sex: "More frequent parent-child communication about sex *slightly* elevates the probability that an adolescent child will subsequently lose his/her virginity before adulthood."[203] Regnerus also presents data indicating that the parents who talk the most with their children about the subject, Black Protestants (by at least 18 points),[204] also have the most sexually active and promiscuous

198. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 71.
199. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 71.
200. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 67.
201. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 67, emphasis in original.
202. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 212–13, emphasis in original.
203. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 71, emphasis in original.
204. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 65; compare Olsho et al., *National Survey of Adolescents and Their Parents*, x.

adolescents.[205] So parents talking to their children seems not to be the major influence in promoting chastity. Perhaps a stronger argument is that a majority of children would rather hear about such matters from their parents,[206] even though not all of them listen.[207]

Because "it is popularly held that evangelical Protestants are the most conservative American religious tradition with respect to sexual attitudes," Regnerus seems slightly chagrined that "evangelical Protestant youth are *not* the religious group least likely to have sex,"[208] and he spends some space trying to explain that fact.[209] Evangelical programs to encourage chastity in youth, like True Love Waits, are not working particularly well, since 88 percent of those who participated in such programs engaged in sexual intercourse before marriage[210] and "in up to 7 of 10 cases, it is *not* with their future spouse."[211] Part of Regnerus's explanation is that adolescents who do not live "in a biologically intact, two-parent family" lack what he terms a "family advantage" and are almost twice as likely to engage in sexual activity.[212] What he downplays is that evangelicals are actually more likely than average to divorce.[213] So among evangelicals, "we see both high marriage rates *and* high divorce rates, together with elevated teenage pregnancy rates, etc."[214] This also explains the high rate of promiscuity among Black Protestants, whose rate of illegitimacy is around 77 percent.[215]

---

205. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 123, 133, 135; Olsho et al., *National Survey of Adolescents and Their Parents*, ix, xi.

206. Olsho et al., *National Survey of Adolescents and Their Parents*, 56–57.

207. Olsho et al., *National Survey of Adolescents and Their Parents*, 73–74.

208. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 153.

209. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 153–61.

210. Sider, *Evangelical Conscience*, 23.

211. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 205.

212. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 155.

213. Sider, *Evangelical Conscience*, 18–20. This factor is downplayed in Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 157.

214. Regnerus, *Forbidden Fruit*, 157.

215. Paul E. Barton and Richard E. Coley, *The Black-White Achievement Gap: When Progress Stopped* (Princeton Educational Testing Service, 2010), 35; compare pp. 21–24.

What Works

Parents, conscientious teenagers, and emerging adults might want to know how to protect themselves from the pitfalls that come in the college-age years. While statistics are great for predicting the behavior of the masses and not the individual, there are a few actions that seem to correlate well to positive consequences in life and faith. The four indicators that seem to correlate most closely to faith playing an important role in an emerging adult's life are (1) attendance at church on a weekly basis, (2) praying frequently,[216] (3) reading scriptures frequently, and (4) avoiding sexual activity outside of marriage.[217] The first three items are necessary to place on the NSYR's devoted category.[218] Among Latter-day Saints, these variables are not independent. If they were, we would expect only about 32 percent of Latter-day Saints to be in the devoted category,[219] instead of the 56 percent who actually are.[220] The flip side is that 29 to 44 percent of Latter-day Saint emerging adults are in danger.[221]

Nothing in this list of behaviors is particularly new to Latter-day Saints who have been paying attention. For those who want some social science to back up their stance, they now have it.

The other curious fact worth noting is that the list of factors influencing positive outcomes is a list of behaviors, not a list of beliefs or of intensity of beliefs. While there is a connection between beliefs and practice, practices have a stronger influence on outcomes than mere beliefs. Actions matter.

---

216. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 215.
217. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 218.
218. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 259.
219. Based on Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 116.
220. Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 304.
221. The lower figure includes the "regular," who are still attending church a few times a month and are otherwise slightly less valiant than the "devoted" (Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 259, 304), who are in the more or less safe category.