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Review of "A Faith for the Generations: How Collegiate Experience Impacts Faith" and "Emerging Adulthood and Faith"

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Timothy W. Herrmann, Kirsten D. Tenhaken, Hannah M. Adderley, and Morgan K. Morris (eds.). *A Faith for the Generations: How Collegiate Experience Impacts Faith.* Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2015. 240 pp. \$22.95, ISBN 9780891123446.

Jonathan P. Hill. *Emerging Adulthood and Faith.* Grand Rapids, MI: Calvin College Press, 2015. 96 pp. \$6.99, ISBN 9781937555115.

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The subject of faith and the university experience has long been a topic of discussion, and both the volumes reviewed here add to that complex conversation. They particularly focus on the current American student experience, providing reflections and data that lead to new and sometimes varied understandings of that experience.

A Faith for the Generations is an evocative title, suggesting the connecting aspects of faith across generations. In a world heavily focused on youth, this title insinuates that faith might bridge the “generational gap,” an intriguing notion that would be beneficial in our fragmented society. A few of the volume’s chapters are significant additions to this particular conversation, engaging deeply with this idea. They are a consolidation of past research and discussions, current research, and perceptive implications for the future. These chapters examine how different generations impact one another spiritually, particularly how college students benefit from intergenerational connection.

However, it is the volume’s subtitle, with its focus on college students and their experience of faith, that more accurately reflects the bulk of the essays in the collection. This collected volume emerged from a symposium at Taylor University on “how collegiate faith impacts the cultivation of faith in the decades to come” (9). The stated intent of the volume is to help “facilitate the discussion of how Christian educators” can help students “embrace the life of Christ” more deeply (13). While there is a general acknowledgement across Christian higher education that this is a valuable conversation, “how this task should be approached and the ultimate ends of our efforts are matters of legitimate debate” (13). This “how” is the intent of both the symposium and the monograph.

A number of chapters in *A Faith for the Generations* are noteworthy for the ways they reflect this stated intent. In chapter 4, “Walking with Emerging Adults on the Spiritual Journey,” Holly Allen, a professor of family studies and Christian ministries at Lipscomb University, unpacks emerging adult culture within the greater American and evangelical cultures. Allen particularly focuses on the twenty-somethings who are leaving a church they see as “too narrow and judgmental” (71). Allen observes that they are also leaving those intergenerational relationships which help them learn how to navigate their lives as adults. She argues that faith communities can be places where these young adults find “those older and wiser to listen as they voice doubts and fears, negotiate peer and hierarchical relationships, and integrate who they were with who they are becoming” (71). Allen notes the developmental significance of such relationships: “Most seasoned believers recognize that transformation from nonbeliever to new believer and from new believer to mature believer happens best in community” (86).

Another chapter of particular note is chapter 1, “Emerging Adulthood and Religious Faith: A Conversation with Christian Smith,” by Timothy W. Herrmann, a professor of higher education at Taylor University. Herrmann notes Smith’s statement: “It is really powerful how many churches, for example, are set up to be oriented around a particular version of

family" (20), but observes that the predominant vision of family (two birth parents with children) is often unfamiliar for emerging adults. When so many come from single parent or blended families, or even families where sexual and gender identities do not conform to evangelical interpretations of family, students are often left unsure of how to define the typical family. Working with college students, one quickly realizes that a definition of a "traditional" or "normal" family no longer exists (if it ever did) and that this deeply affects the security and significance of many students.

Vern Bengtson, a professor of social work at the University of Southern California, likewise poses challenges to conventional wisdom in chapter 11, "Millennials, Parents, Grandparents: Are Families Still Passing on Their Faith?" Bengtson asks: "How significant are these differences in religion between today's Millennials and older age groups? To what extent is there a *generation gap* in religion? Are families failing to pass on their spiritual and religious values on to their children?" (214). These are questions that many of us working with college students forget, but they are important to consider, particularly when encountering the despondent popular literature about our students. Are today's students so very different from other generations? Certainly, in terms of culture, technology, and experiences. But in terms of faith and values, are they that different from their parents and grandparents? Bengtson does not think so.

Bengtson notes the influence and impact of other generations on college students. Particularly looking at the role of grandparents over the past four decades, Bengtson writes about "the increasing importance of grandparents in American family life" (216). He notes his own surprise that the "data indicated that parents showed relatively high influence on their Millennial children's religious orientation, even higher than we had anticipated" (220). Ultimately, from the data reviewed, he concludes "that family bonds and family influences are strong. In fact, multigenerational bonds may be stronger than ever before in America" (225).

One final chapter that particularly caught my attention was chapter 8, "What's Wrong with 'Meaning-Making' To Describe Faith? The Problem with Sharon Daloz Parks's Kantian Assumptions for Student Development," by Stephen Rankin, a chaplain at Southern Methodist University. Rankin scrutinizes Sharon Parks's *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*,¹¹ a volume Parks intended as an examination of aspects of faith development of young adults. While I was anticipating in Rankin's chapter an engagement with those themes, Rankin rather seeks to engage the book at a theological and philosophical level. He seems to be concerned that Parks, by noting the importance of young adults drawing individual meaning from their experiences, was undermining the validity of institutional theological positions; that is, instead of their understanding being rooted in orthodox theology, it was grounded in individual interpretation.

I find that while Rankin's critique may have some validity, he fails to interact with Parks's central themes of the importance of community and the presence of someone who can speak wisdom and truth into students' lives. Rankin takes issue with the notion Parks describes as "meaning-making." But for Parks, these attempts at understanding spiritual things were never to be done in a vacuum, but rather in relationship, often within a faith-based community. Parks sees meaning-making as one of the first steps in students seeing beyond themselves and starting to discern a broader reason for their experiences. Based on Rankin's 20 years of collegiate experience, I was hoping that he might engage with Parks at an applied level, not just on the basis of theological concerns.

¹¹Sharon Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

The second volume reviewed here, Jonathan P. Hill's *Emerging Adulthood and Faith*, offers a corrective to current literature suggesting the decline of Christianity in America. Hill is a sociologist at Calvin College, and his work is fascinating in both its conciseness and its depth. Hill's aim is to "gain some perspective on emerging adults and their relationship to faith" (3). Much of the current popular and even academic literature suggests that faith is under siege and declining in an American context. Hill's application of statistics analysis within the context of the social sciences brings some further nuance and context to this conversation.

Hill's underlying approach is built on two facts observed in American statistical research: 1) that college graduation is "associated with increased interest and participation in the faith of one's youth" (4); and 2) that college attendance and graduation is also "associated with increased doubt in one's faith and results in a shift away from identification as evangelical Protestant" (4). As a social scientist, he cautions readers and notes some common pitfalls in the use of statistics. In examining quantitative research related to college students, Hill states: "The question remains, however, whether or not isolating young people as a group, treating them as a distinct generation, and comparing them to older Americans, is the best way to make sense of the changing religious landscape" (5). He expresses some caution that is prudent to consider.

Hill has three primary aims in this volume, the first being "a re-examination of the religious practice and identity of young people" (11). He notes and asks: "Millennials are abandoning Christian practice and identification. But is this true?" (11), going on to observe, "Make no mistake about it, young people are leaving churches" (15). However, Hill also notes: "The faithful are still there, but the nominal are shrinking fast, and the ranks of the unaffiliated are growing" (20). He suggests that the issue is deeper than disinterest:

At a cultural level, the values that are central to liberal Protestantism – tolerance, individualism, democracy, and critical inquiry – have been absorbed into the mainstream. In an ironic twist, these values actually work to undermine the organizational vitality of liberal Protestantism (after all, why have an organization to support values that have become dominant in public life?). (21)

Hill notes that conventional wisdom argues "that the rise of the religious 'nones' is coming at the expense of the church. This is simply not true" (25).

Hill's second primary aim in the volume is to address the perception that there is skepticism about the value of education among evangelical and conservative American Christians. Such skepticism is often discussed in relation to a concern that education is detrimental to true faith. Hill explores this concern: "College has long been thought of as corrosive to faith. ... Again, is this true" (11)? Analyzing statistics, responses by college students nationally, and their own self-reporting, Hill concludes: "College ultimately has a complex relationship with student faith, but the story of unilateral religious decline is clearly false" (11). He states:

Results don't show a clear-cut pattern of secularism associated with attending and graduating from college. College graduates are actually *more* likely to practice their faith and say it is important in their daily life. They are no more likely to disaffiliate from religious faith, although they do appear more likely to shy away from exclusivist claims about the Bible. (30)

It seems that "marriage and family life, political participation and volunteering, religious participation – all of this has remained relatively stable over time for college graduates but has been declining among those without college degrees" (35). Hill concludes, "College is most certainly not a catalyst for total disaffiliation or atheism" (36).

Hill's final primary aim is exploring science within higher education and its impact on the faith of believing students. He writes:

Two dominant narratives exist about the faith of young people and science. On the one hand, some propose that the reason many young people experience a crisis of faith is because they have compromised their beliefs by succumbing to the secularist assumptions of modern science. Others hold that the rejection of mainstream science by many conservative Protestants has set their children up for a future crisis of faith in college. Both of these positions assume that science is a primary front in the battle for the souls of adolescents and emerging adults. But is this true? (11-12)

On the basis of his data, Hill notes, "The potential for conflict between faith and science turns out to be a minor concern for most believers" (12). It is a concern for some, but interestingly, while "many young people believe that religion and science ultimately conflict with one another, there is no evidence that they feel pressure to change beliefs because of science" (57). It seems that the concern over the clash of science and faith in higher education is not as widespread as has been thought. It appears to be inconsequential for many students in their own lives, even though they believe it might be a factor for others. As I wrote this review, the Pew Research Center published a report noting that "while three-quarters of those who seldom or never attend religious services say that science and religion are often in conflict, almost half of evangelicals say that the two are compatible." The Pew study further states: "People's sense that there generally is a conflict between religion and science seems to have less to do with their own religious beliefs than it does with their perceptions of other people's beliefs."¹²

The essence of Hill's observations can be summed up in his statement that "the majority of young people who have been raised in the Church decline in their participation during late adolescence and early emerging adulthood, but the majority of these individuals are not permanently 'leaving' the Church in any meaningful sense of the term" (25). As many who work with college students would note, "pronouncing religious doomsday scenarios for today's youth should be avoided" (61).

The first main insight I gleaned from these two volumes is that parent, grandparent, and family values are enduring in the lives of students. They may be buried for a season, but they return in depth, transformed and customized to the individual. That is, those students who enter college with real faith tend either to hold onto it or to come back to it after their college years. Interestingly, the degree that faith has been a part of a student's life early on is generally the degree at which it manifests itself in later years. A second main insight for me is the simple reminder that when researchers probe their data, they discover that depth of faith is an important component in our lives as humans.

Whether it is called spiritual, religious, or theological, the experience of college students continues to be a major concern for many in higher education. One does not have to go too far before coming across despairing and disconcerting reflections on the faith of college students. Once again, I recommend Hill's *Emerging Adulthood and Faith* as a corrective. While it is a quick read, it is nonetheless a weighty primer on college students and their faith. *Faith for the Generations*, on the other hand, is a volume that requires more selective reading. While it is not a particularly cohesive volume, each chapter stands on its own providing various levels of interest, and there is value to be found between its covers.

¹²See Cary Funk and Becka A. Alper, "Religion and Science: Highly Religious Americans Are Less Likely Than Others to See Conflict between Faith and Science," *Pew Research Center: Internet, Science, and Tech* (October 2, 2015), <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/10/22/science-and-religion/> accessed November 2, 2015.