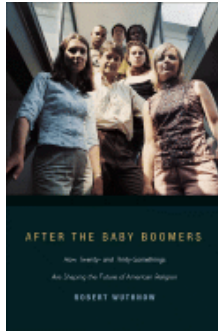


CIRCUITRIDER *Reviews*



**After the Baby Boomers: How
Twenty- and Thirty-
Somethings Are Shaping the
Future of American Religion**
by Robert Wuthnow
(Princeton University Press, 2007
ISBN-13 9780691127651)
\$29.95

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After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion by Robert Wuthnow

I have spent my entire career as an ordained Methodist in the halls of academia, pastoring to students as they make their way through their college years. When I tell other clergy colleagues what I do, I inevitably receive one of two responses. The common reaction is to ask when I will return to the local church, and the asker usually reminds me that we need more young clergy in the parish. The other common response is to ask me where the young people have gone, and how to get them back in the pews. I understand and am sympathetic to the underlying theology in both responses, namely that the local church is the center of ministry. But after reading *After the Baby Boomers*, I am inclined to observe that these responses highlight much of the shortcomings of our ministry with young adults.

The premise of Robert Wuthnow's book is that there are too many so-called "authorities" on the post-boomer generations who speak out of opinion rather than evidence. Strategic plans, new worship services, revisioning workshops—none of these work if we don't actually know the problem we're trying to solve, and ministry is misguided if it fails to understand the people it serves.

Arguing against the sound-byte oversimplifications that often force post-boomers into (or out of) baby-boomer categorizations, Wuthnow's work is a gold mine of concrete information. There is no wasted space here. For 232 pages (298 if you count the notes and appendix), Wuthnow packs paragraph after paragraph with seemingly every bit of relevant research done over the last several years. The sheer amount of information and insight keeps this from being a quick weekend read, but it ensures that this text will be a reference point for years to come.

This book is more than raw data, however. Wuthnow's highly detailed work is interspersed with the conclusions of someone who is sympathetic to the church's mission, yet the author resists the temptation to clearly spell out what authentic ministry with these persons might look like. As the director of Princeton's Center for the Study of Religion, he has more than a passing interest in the work of American churches. So while this is clearly a well-researched text composed by an accomplished sociologist, it is not written simply for the academics among us. While it does not read like the typical book that might pass across a pastor's desk, Wuthnow writes this especially for the local church.

What is perhaps most striking is that there are no simple answers here. Every time a bit of data makes a claim, Wuthnow is careful to contextualize it for the non-professional, giving a more complete view of how the information can be used most responsibly. There are certainly helpful nuances that should shape the church's ministry to our youngest generations, but there is (perhaps thankfully) no magic formula offered.

There is a great deal of demythologizing, however. For example, Wuthnow highlights one of the "defining" characteristics often associated with the millennial generation, namely that they are drawn to small groups. While agreeing with the observation, Wuthnow points out that baby boomers, too, exhibit the same tendency. In another portion of the book, Wuthnow examines the popularly-held conviction that internet communication will replace human contact for young adults, and concludes that, while the internet is certainly an important piece of the current cultural puzzle, its role and overall significance parallels radio and television's importance in past generations. That is to say, it is significant, but particularly for religious young adults, the internet plays a "minimal role."¹ Alternative, or "contemporary," styles of worship also seem

¹ Wuthnow, Robert. *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty-Somethings and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion*. Princeton: Princeton U P, 2007. p. 212.

to hold little appeal over traditional services for young people.² One by one, he takes apart the oversimplifications that have shaped our pastoral thinking over the last several years.

The view that young people will eventually return to church once they have children of their own has given some hope to our local congregations, but Wuthnow points out that marriage, not child-bearing, is the greatest predictor of church attendance. As young men and women wait longer to enter marriage (seeing it as a “final” step of young adulthood, rather than an initial one), the pool of young adults that typically populate church pews has dwindled. In other words, the church seems to hold its traditional appeal with young married couples, though that demographic is on the decline. Church language about families that devalues single persons will likely alienate young men and women who are not actively seeking marriage.

And while married couples with children have a good chance of making into our churches, roughly half of the children in this country are born into or end up in single parent homes or are raised by unmarried couples. This demographic does not exhibit the same tendencies as the more “traditional” married couple, meaning that the presence of children in those family units does not mean they will end up in churches.

A larger developmental issue that Wuthnow wants to highlight, that is born out by these other issues, is that society has not responded adequately to the emotional and spiritual needs of young people as that generation has changed. With a longer lifespan comes longer “young adulthood,” meaning that men and women are delaying rites of passage like marriage and childbearing (and perhaps church membership). As lifelong careers with one company become nostalgic memories, and our educational systems continue to act as if adulthood begins earnestly at age 18, there is a critical lack of support for the issues that define our youngest generations. Wuthnow is not the first to say this, but his voice is all the more compelling given the depth of his research.

The image of the young adult as “tinkerer” in Wuthnow’s book is particularly helpful, as he describes the youngest generations as being jack-of-all-trades types of thinkers, who assemble a life from a

² *Ibid.* p.224.

³ *Ibid.* p.xvii.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 215.

⁵ *Ibid.* pp.106-106.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 216.

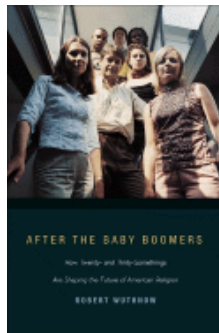
buffet line of philosophies and options: “The future that already exists among young adults is one of growing complexity...where it is possible not only for some people to be orthodox and others to be heterodox, but also for the same person to be both.”³ While young adults exhibit a range of what we might call traditional Christian beliefs (such as life-after-death, and the Bible as the Word of God), these beliefs are intermingled with input and authority outside the church: “The core holds steady, persuading one that the Bible is still a valuable source of moral insight, for example, but the core is amended almost continuously through conversations with friends, reflections about an especially meaningful experience on vacation or at work, or from a popular song.”⁴

As spiritual tinkerers, young men and women are an incredibly diverse group, which makes simple polling and analysis very difficult. Wuthnow cites one study that showed a majority of (self-identified) Biblical literalists do not consult the Bible even once a week.⁵ To ask this group a question about the importance of the Bible would give you one view, to ask them about actual usage of the Bible in their daily lives would paint a very different picture.

What is clear is what we perhaps already knew: young men and women are a shrinking minority within our congregations, particularly for those of us within Methodism and other mainline Protestant traditions. Even Evangelical Protestants seem to be on shaky ground, contrary to what media outlets report. While our churches dwindle and struggle to redefine themselves, a group of young adults that is numerically larger than the Boomer generation struggles to self-define without any genuine resources: “We provide day care centers, schools, welfare programs, family counseling, colleges, job training programs, and even detention centers as a kind of institutional surround-sound until young adults reach age 21, and then we provide nothing... This is not a good way to run a society.”⁶

It is difficult to read this book and not come away with a sense of urgency and some significant concerns about the ways we practice and conceive of ministry. Wuthnow points out that clergy are among the most dedicated and hard-working professionals in any field, which means that often we are only familiar with the reality of our local congregations. Most pastors spend little time with genuinely non-churched persons, and therefore are ill-equipped to understand what programs or ministries might attract those persons to their churches. Our church visions usually center around traditional families, and our programs in that area still seem effective, but we should take seriously the reality that this demographic is shrinking rapidly. We must ask ourselves what our

religious communities might offer to this generation of tinkerers, and respond appropriately.



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