Christian Smith is the director of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society at the University of Notre Dame. He has led the National Study on Youth and Religion and in 2005 published *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford University Press, 2005). That important work summarized an extensive study of the spiritual inclinations and aspirations of young people 13 to 18 years old. Five years later, Smith surveyed the same group of young people, who were by then 18 to 23 years old. In conjunction with Patricia Snell, he has recently published the results of this survey in *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

*This is a very important book.* Smith provides not only a wealth of empirical data but also offers thoughtful analysis of this data and its implications for the lives of young adults, religious traditions and American society. Smith’s familiarity with issues in philosophy and theology, in addition to his expertise in sociology, makes his analysis that much more cogent. His analysis of major features of U.S. culture and its effects on the thinking and choices of young people is also very helpful.

This study is of a random sample of young adults from all religious traditions, as well as those who have not been a part of any religious tradition. But Smith breaks down the information along religious and denominational lines in ways that are quite helpful and illuminating. Catholics who read this book will discover

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much pertinent information about Catholics who are at the younger end of the young adult spectrum.

Building on the earlier work of Jeffrey Arnett, Smith employs the term “emerging adults” rather than young adults. This term describes young people who have, for the most part, moved beyond the stage of adolescence but have not yet reached full adulthood. Smith sees this life stage as a new phase that has grown progressively longer because of a number of factors in American society. Smith echoes the work of Robert Wuthnow (After the Baby Boomers, 2007), in pointing especially to the postponement of marriage and parenting as a key factor contributing to the genesis of this new stage of life. Other factors include: the growth in higher education, extending for many into graduate school; changes in the U.S. and global economies, resulting in careers with less security, more frequent job changes, and the need for ongoing training and education; and the willingness of parents to extend financial and other kinds of support to children in their twenties and thirties. Smith points out that the phase of emerging adulthood can last as long as twelve years.

Those of us who work with young adults will resonate with Smith’s conclusions that, while the period of emerging adulthood is a time of significant growth and opportunity, it is also marked by daunting challenges. In his concluding chapter (a very illuminating, synthetic chapter), he describes this phase as a time of unparalleled freedom in which young people are usually able to explore numerous options for their lives. He adds, “For many, this age is also marked not only by a lot of fun and growth but also by a great deal of transience, confusion, anxiety, self-obsession, melodrama, conflict, stress, disappointment, and sometimes emotional damage and bodily harm” (280). This is a sobering analysis, but it is an observation that I think many young adults and pastoral ministers will recognize as containing a great deal of truth.

Smith’s book is much too rich in information to summarize adequately in this review. I will simply enumerate a few of the insights that I found to be particularly enlightening:

- Smith reminds us that the world of emerging adults (like the world of older adults) is a complex one. Young people are not easily categorized into one or two types in terms of their attitudes toward religion and spirituality. He includes a chapter (chapt. 6) in which he identifies six major types of emerging adults, though he admits that even this categorization is over-simplified: (1) committed traditionalists (15 percent); (2) selective adherents (30 percent); (3) the spiritually open (15 percent); (4) the religiously indifferent (25 percent); (5) the religiously disconnected (5 percent); and (6) the irreligious (10 percent). His description and discussion of each “type” is balanced and thought-provoking.

- The role of parents in the overall character and the religious formation of emerging adults is treated in some detail. Smith debunks the idea that emerging adults
do not desire the involvement of parents in their lives. While they wish to renegotiate their relationships with their parents, most do want to be engaged with them as they transition to adulthood. With regard to religious practice, Smith argues that the example of parents, and that of other significant adults, is of critical importance for the spiritual development of young adults. His research leads him to conclude that the influence of parents trumps the influence of peers with regard to religious belief and practice (285).

- Smith highlights the widespread impact of U.S. culture on the attitudes and convictions of young adults. Two factors emerge as particularly significant: American individualism and the worldview of deconstructive postmodernism. He takes note of the radically individualistic views of many emerging adults regarding religious belief and practice. This individualism minimizes the importance of church tradition and of belonging to a community of faith. It also tends to isolate people; Smith talks about “sovereign individuals lacking conviction or direction” (292). Postmodernist assumptions tend to relativize everything and to leave young (and older) people in doubt about whether there is anything that is objectively real or true. These presuppositions affect emerging adults’ attitudes toward religious beliefs and moral choices. As Smith puts it, “Some moral beliefs may personally feel right, but no moral belief can rationally claim to be really true because that implies criticizing or discounting other moral beliefs” (293). This presents an obvious challenge for Christians and especially for Catholic Christians.

- Smith argues that the widespread assumption that many young adults are “spiritual but not religious” does not seem to hold up in the face of the evidence. While he does identify a small group of emerging adults who are “spiritually open,” he finds that most emerging adults who are serious about a spiritual quest are also actively involved in their faith. He says, “The emerging adults who do sustain strong subjective religion in their lives, it turns out, are those who also maintain strong external expressions of faith, including religious service attendance” (252). Smith also underlines the importance of young adults developing practices of personal prayer and reflection on Scripture for their later involvement in faith communities.

- When emerging adults are differentiated according to religious tradition and particular denomination, Catholics tend to fall at the lower ends of the spectrum of religious practice and affiliation. For example, in most categories, Catholics and mainline Protestants manifest significantly less involvement than evangelical and black Protestants. While the overall religious practice of young adults did not change dramatically between 1972 and 2006, the involvement of Catholics did show significant decline. The percentage of Catholics aged 18 to 23 who attend Mass weekly or more often is about 15 percent. These findings present clear challenges to Catholic pastoral ministers and young adults themselves.
• Smith does identify a minority of young adults (he estimates about 15 percent) who embrace a strong religious faith and who are able to articulate their beliefs with relative clarity. These are the young adults who tend to be most actively involved in campus ministry programs, young adult groups, and programs like Catholics on Call. Smith finds that emerging adults of this type tend to focus more on inner piety and personal moral integrity than on social justice or political witness. Though the overall picture is one of decline in the religious practice of younger emerging adults, Smith affirms, “but, it is worth noting, these more seriously committed young adults do exist, and not simply as a struggling remnant. More than a few do buck the trends of religious decline and indifference” (283).

*Souls in Transition* is one of the most important books I have read in a long time. While it deals only with the younger end of the emerging adult spectrum, many of its findings are, I think, also reflective of the experience of young adults older than 23. One often hears popular descriptions and categorizations of young adults based on anecdotal evidence. While studies like Smith’s always involve subjective elements of measurement and analysis, they do root us more fully in the reality of the young adult world. Those of us who care deeply about the spiritual development of young adults will do well to reflect on Smith’s empirical findings and his thoughtful analysis. For Catholic pastoral ministers and concerned young adults, I believe that studies like this one call us to extend and deepen the ongoing conversation about the best ways to accompany young adults on their spiritual journeys and to invite them to active participation in the Catholic community of faith.