

Wuthnow, Robert. *After the Baby Boomers*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. xviii + 298 pp. Hardcover, \$29.95.

Robert Wuthnow is a sociologist at Princeton University and a sought-after author. His previous works include *Growing Up Religious: Christians and Jews and Their Journeys of Faith* (2000), and *Acts of Compassion: Caring for Others and Helping Ourselves* (1993), for which he was awarded a Pulitzer nomination.

Wuthnow's latest book, *After the Baby Boomers*, focuses on the current generation of young adults and their attitudes to religion, and how being or not being religious shapes the different aspects of their lives. He does this by sketching a picture of the American young-adult population (21 to 45 years) and their relationship to religion in chapters 1–5. In subsequent chapters, he takes a closer look at the religious lives of young adults: their spirituality (chap. 6), faith and family (chap. 7), the effect of religion on politics (chap. 8), emerging trends in the effect of immigration on religion and vice versa (chap. 9); and the use of the Internet and its effects on religion (chap. 10). He concludes with a chapter on youthful congregations.

Wuthnow seeks to explain “how twenty- and thirty-somethings are shaping the future of American religion.” He does this by statistical analysis of data extracted from General Social Surveys over the last thirty-five years. Comparing the 1970s to the years 2000–2002, he provides a variety of different graphs explaining the being and doing of young adults. These statistics give a clear overview of the religious attitudes of young adults and are easily interpretable. He also provides an expanded explanation on each of these charts.

Among the apparent differences between 1970 and 2000 are the lifestyle choices affecting marriage (marrying at an older age as compared to 1970), children (fewer), and higher education (increased attendance, especially of women). These lifestyle differences are reflected in the religious experiences of the twenty- and thirty-somethings, resulting in declining church participation, a shift in orthodox beliefs (more young adults in the twenty-first century believe in life after death, but fewer believe in either God or Jesus), more church shopping, and rising involvement in virtual churches, i.e., “Web site[s] or chat room[s] to which people come to worship” (213).

Besides these charts, and the information they provide, short anecdotes taken from qualitative interviews also provide interesting insights about the particular population described (e.g., a single female who was the only twenty-something attending her Baptist church) (69). These stories give a face to the impersonal numbers and percentages; however, they are, unfortunately, too infrequent. They give little hint of *why* young adults leave the church, a question statistics cannot always answer. Wuthnow tries to give explanations and answers to different problems presented, but they remain merely theories, not conclusive explanations as to *why*. The discipline of sociological research used here by Wuthnow is, therefore, not enough. More than mere facts are needed; we need concern.

Wuthnow's main argument in this book is “that unless religious leaders take younger adults more seriously, the future of American religion is in doubt” (17). He contends that “we provide day care centers, schools, welfare

programs, family counselling, colleges, job training programs, and even detention centres as a kind of institutional surround-sound until young adults reach age 21, and then we provide nothing . . . all the major decisions a person has to make about marriage, child rearing, and work happen after these support systems have ceased to function" (216).

Wuthnow seems to be speaking here as a social scientist, rather than as someone whose true concern is retaining young adults within the church. He presents few proposals for potential action, and his idea of a congregation seems too similar to a "business" or "religious market" (81, 189). The overall impression he gives is that the church is no more than a voluntary organization. Although the statistics presented in this book are a useful tool and give plenty of information on the religion of young adults, the book remains descriptive.

A comparable book is Roger Dudley's *Why Our Teenagers Leave the Church* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000). Although Dudley's book contains statistics comparing teenagers (15-16 years) with young adults (25-26 years), he is more prescriptive in his implications and analysis than is Wuthnow. Dudley provides fewer statistics than Wuthnow does, but offers more suggestions for action. Whereas Wuthnow's book attests that many twenty- and thirty-somethings leave the church (a fact confirmed by Dudley, 35), it fails to give solutions for how to bring those twenty- and thirty-somethings back to the church. It should be made clear, however, that Dudley's book does not provide absolute solutions, but in his longitudinal study, he found factors that greatly influenced whether or not teenagers left the church, such as family worship in the home and personal involvement in the church.

Although *After the Baby Boomers* does not deal with the psychological side of choices made by young adults (*why* they have left the church), or the effect of these choices on congregations, it does provide interesting insights into the demographics of this generation. It even appears that Wuthnow's book predicts a long-term positive trend. On one hand, while he sees the negative trends of declining religious involvement in twenty- and thirty-somethings (compared to the Baby Boomer generation), the next younger generation of young adults want to go back to traditional church life, showing implicitly that the church still has a mission and a future.

For those looking for answers as to *why* young people leave the church or *how* the church can attract them back, this is not the right book. However, for those who are engaged in young-adult ministry and who are interested in facts and general implications, this is a useful tool and worth one's time.

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