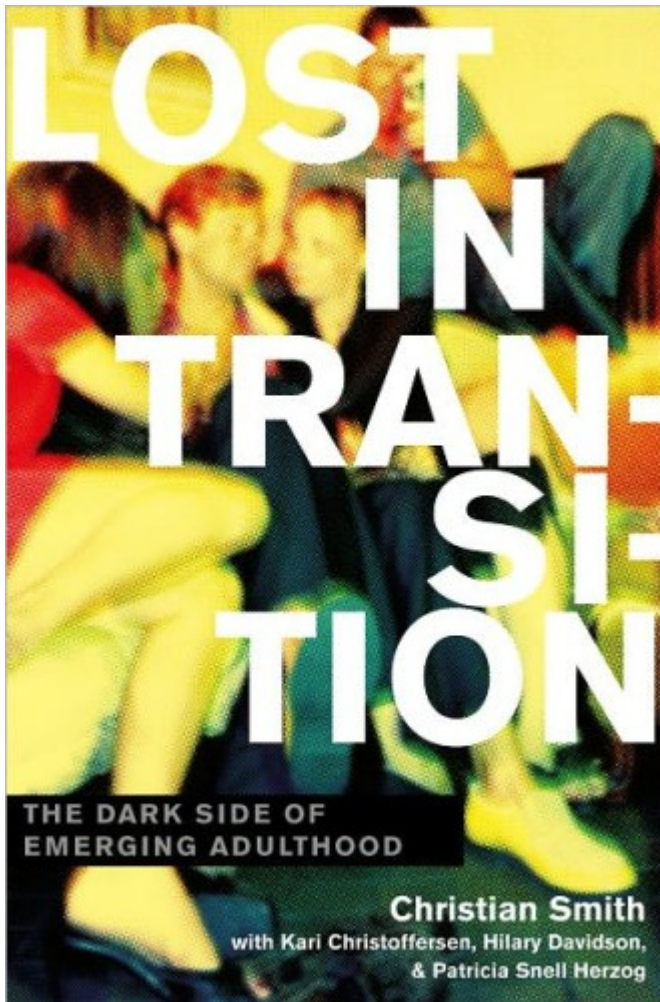


# Young adult realities

by [Andrew Root](#) in the [October 4, 2011](#) issue

## In Review



## Lost in Transition

By Christian Smith  
Oxford University Press

Two opposing perspectives on the present generation of young people and their potential have dominated in the media and in the consciousness of church

members. One group (discussed in books like Don Tapscott's *Growing Up Digital*) fawns over young adults, calling them the smartest generation ever and their altruism and creativity the salvation of our society. This interpretation is unsubtly countered by others, who say that this generation is probably the dumbest that has ever existed (as in Emory professor Mark Bauerlein's book, *The Dumbest Generation* ).

*Lost in Transition* offers an insightful, balanced take on what the lead author calls "emergent adults"—those between 18 and 23. The book doesn't fall into either of the aforementioned ditches because the research behind the text reveals that emergent adults are neither the great hope of our nation (the so-called Obama generation) nor the crazed idiots disdained by some intellectuals. Christian Smith, a professor of sociology at Notre Dame, offers a way between those vast overstatements.

Smith is not new to the subject. This is his third book based on his nationwide survey of youth and religion. He presented the study's initial findings on high school-aged young people in *Soul Searching*; he then followed those young people to college and marked their religious changes in *Souls in Transition*.

In *Souls in Transition*, Smith focused on the religious transition of young adults and employed the voice of sociological reporting. In *Lost in Transition*, he goes further, making direct and even moral assertions about the dark, potentially dangerous realities of the world of emergent adults. He offers what he calls a "critical, public sociology" and a "sociological imagination" that examines cultural scripts and institutional realities.

This book packs a punch: Smith is not afraid to make known his opinion that although emergent adults are not the spawn of the devil, there is much that is dark and dangerous in the institutional and cultural currents in which they swim. But the darkness of those waters is not emergent adults' problem alone; nor is it their fault. Smith places strong responsibility on systems that adults have perpetuated, reminding us that the problems of emergent adults are the responsibility of the whole of society.

Smith sees five particularly dark realities blinding emergent adults and threatening their lives. The first is the lack of a moral compass. Unlike conservative hand-wringers, Smith is concerned not about what emergent adults' moral beliefs are but about something worse: they seem unable to enter into any kind of moral reasoning

at all. They instead default to hyperindividualism, believing that whatever seems right to each person is moral. Smith found that a significant percentage of those interviewed would be willing to allow the possibility that almost anything is right—except judging others. Judging another's individual choice or action and thus impinging on that person's moral relativity is the only thing that is absolutely wrong.

The radicalization of individualism is writ large with Smith's second dark reality: consumerism. He shows that emergent adults see little that is problematic about consumption, other than being in debt. In other words, emergent adults think it is always right to buy what they desire if they can afford it. According to Smith, this consumption-oriented mentality has led young adults to define the good life in a way that has little or nothing to do with transcendence or the public good. Rather, almost all the emergent adults defined having a good life as having the means to buy what they want.

The third and fourth dark realities for emergent adults are connected: heavy drinking and unbounded sexual activity. Smith contends that emergent adults too often succumb to deep cultural and life-course scripts that assert that normal young adulthood is filled with drunken tales and forgotten sexual partners. Yet ironically, a large percentage of emergent adults reported boredom as their motivation for drinking. This leads Smith to argue that drinking and drug use may be two explicit signs of the boredom common in a hyperconsumeristic society that sees the fullness of life in individual acts of buying.

Sexual activity also seems to have something to do with boredom and drunken promiscuity, leading to the escalation of a hook-up culture in which emergent adults have sexual encounters with no desire for any kind of commitment other than having the sexual experience. According to this research, hooking up and dating appear to be mutually exclusive, unrelated realities.

Most young people have had their first hook-up prior to entering adulthood. Smith found that a majority had their first sexual experience by age 16. So what's the big deal? According to Smith, the big deal is the deep pain that young women in particular experience because of their sexual activity.

Although the researchers heard significant stories of confusion and loss due to sexual activity, to their perplexity they also heard emergent adults assert that they have few regrets even about the darkest of experiences. The respondents seemed

to have a tenacious, almost irrational desire to avoid regret.

The final dark reality is young adults' lack of political engagement. Smith found little support for the media hype of the engaged "Obama generation" and instead encountered deep apathy and cynicism. Overwhelmingly, it appeared that emergent adults are optimistic about their own individual lives but much less so about national or global realities. Moreover, Smith found that emergent adults are simply not that interested in volunteering and that they rarely give to charity—often because they imagine that they don't have money to give.

Smith points to the need for change in institutions: secondary education needs to provide moral education, the political system needs to lose its zero-sum rhetoric, the government needs to regulate alcohol advertising and universities need to concern themselves with the personal development of their students. And clearly there is a place for the church to join and support these efforts.

It became starkly clear as I read this important book that significant suffering and emptiness exist under the surface optimism of this cohort of young people. Individualism, boredom, sexual hurt and fear of admitting regret all point to the need for the church to use its theological imagination to speak of a God who meets us in our doubt and suffering when our shell of optimism is too fragile to hold our being. A theology of the cross that seeks God in the honest reflection of our own broken narratives comes to be of particular importance.