Seven spiritual beliefs of young adults

Karma is real. Just do good. It’s all good.

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For more than a decade scholars have been investigating the spiritual lives of teenagers and young adults in the US in a sustained research project called the National Study of Youth and Religion. In the latest installment in this project, we interviewed a range of emerging adults about their lives, their relationships, their hopes and dreams, and even their failures. The young adults responded in articulate and insightful ways about these aspects of their lives.

But their articulateness did not extend to talking about religion or spirituality. This inarticulacy has been noted over the life of the research project, starting when the subjects were teens. In the intervening years, their ability to articulate religious teachings and exactly what they believe doesn’t seem to have improved in any significant way.

Emerging adults from some traditions—conservative Protestants and Latter-day Saints, for example—were better at articulating the teachings of their faith than were others, but even for these groups the norm was a lack of religious literacy—even regarding their own tradition. In general, emerging adults, regardless of how religiously committed they were, had difficulty expressing what they know about their religion—including their own religious beliefs, God, heaven or hell, and any number of other issues.

Emerging adults are not alone in this trait; several studies have shown the limited state of religious knowledge among Americans in general. How can we explain this inability among emerging adults—and perhaps, more broadly, among Americans—to provide articulate answers to questions related to their religious and spiritual beliefs? In our view, there are three likely explanations that are each present, in different degrees, for different people.

First, and perhaps most obvious, there is a lack of knowledge about religion in general and their own religious traditions in particular. As was argued in the initial book in this research project, *Soul Searching* (by Christian Smith and Melina Lundquist Denton), attaining religious knowledge is no different from learning other things: it takes an explicit effort. In short, religion needs to be taught.

Many emerging adults told us that their parents were “open” to religion but that it was not something that the parents actually required or encouraged, assuming instead that emerging adults would pursue it on their own if they were interested. We’ve also heard the emerging adults in this study talk in the same way about how they want to approach religion with their own children. As a result, to the extent that emerging adults have picked up on religious knowledge, it is in an incomplete way, and the knowledge they do have is tailored to their own interests and needs.

Second, religion just isn’t all that important to most emerging adults and competes with other responsibilities and commitments. Even for those who are otherwise religiously committed, the tendency is to maintain a level of commitment that is less demanding of their time and effort. As a completely voluntary institution, and one that can often require time and effort, religion loses out to more pressing demands. In turn, the less they are involved in religious institutions, of whatever sort, the less opportunity and interest they have to develop a bank of religious knowledge.

Finally, among those emerging adults who have maintained some relationship with religion, whether they can be categorized as committed, marginal, or disaffiliated, religious knowledge is not seen as something that needs to be explained. In our view, this approach is related to the way that emerging adults approach moral issues. Emerging adults consistently frame their moral decision making as something they “just know” or “feel.” A decision is right or wrong based on tacit knowledge that is felt rather than rationally articulated.

Similarly, while they may be fairly certain of their religious beliefs, they are only able to express the general contours of those beliefs, without many specifics. Their beliefs remain “taken for granted” or are an assumed part of their lives, and they are more or less accepting of their faith as they have experienced it growing up. Ideas about God and faith are things they “just know.” With some notable exceptions, emerging adults see no need to develop well-articulated beliefs because beliefs are just an intuitive part of the world in which they have always lived.

Despite their inarticulacy about specific religious beliefs, emerging adults do maintain a kind of generalized religious or spiritual perspective through which their particular beliefs are filtered. They share a more or less coherent view of the world that refers to the supernatural in its explanations and rationalizations of activities, which helps them understand and organize their experiences in the world.

This perspective can be described as a “do it yourself” religious or spiritual outlook, in which they both borrow and develop beliefs and morals from different religious traditions and larger cultural currents, without any need for greater involvement in or commitment to any particular religious tradition or for any actual coherence with these traditions.

They’ve picked up cues about religion from their youth and how they were raised, as well as from the larger culture, cues that are cobbled together into a highly individualized religious/spiritual perspective tailored to their own needs. For most emerging adults, this perspective operates mostly as the background assumptions of their daily lives but nonetheless informs how they understand the world.

We have identified seven core tenets of this general outlook: 1) karma is real, 2) everybody goes to heaven, 3) just do good, 4) it’s all good, 5) religion is easy, 6) morals are self-evident, and 7) no regrets.

These basic tenets are defined and combined in somewhat different ways but are present among most emerging adults.

Karma is real. In our interviews, many emerging adults explicitly mentioned their belief in karma, while others expressed a similar idea, such as “everything happens for a reason,” or some related perspective that suggests belief in some spiritual or perhaps undefinable supernatural force that generally works to make for a just and ordered world.

Their view of karma is a popularized version that is not particularly true to its actual religious meaning. It is a way to explain how the bad things and the good things that happen in their lives tend to balance out. The concept of karma operates as a quasi-moral code that provides them with both some sense of the necessity to treat other people well or to otherwise do good (or at least not harmful) things in the world and an explanation—a nonreligious theodicy of sorts—for why good people ultimately end up having good things happen to them and bad people end up having bad things happen to them.

Everybody goes to heaven. In the view of most emerging adults, going to heaven is generally a result of how you act in the world rather than being related to any specific religious teachings about heaven, hell, or the afterlife. While emerging adults tend to express a belief that people go to heaven because of their good works on earth, they also believe it is the rare person who does not go to heaven.

Rather than there being some sort of ledger that weighs a person’s good actions against their bad actions—such as in their version of karma—being kept out of heaven is determined by whether a person performs actions that are unforgiveable. This punishment is mostly reserved for murderers, rapists, and other people who have hurt another person in a significant way.

Just do good. The golden rule for emerging adults is to be good to other people and to treat them fairly. This is related to their beliefs about karma and who goes to heaven as well as to the conviction that the most important moral code is not to hurt anyone. That is, if you treat people well, you increase your odds of going to heaven. But, more than this, being good to others is an expected way to live and act, although the particular elements of “treating others well” are largely undefined. This outlook has persisted throughout the course of this ten-year study, as exemplified most memorably when one teenager told us that his perspective on life boiled down

to: “You know, don’t be an asshole.”

It’s all good. We’ve all heard the saying, “It’s all good,” usually as a replacement for saying something like, “Everything’s OK,” or “Don’t worry about it.” This phrase also highlights how emerging adults strive to live their lives as nonjudgmentally as possible.

For emerging adults, “It’s all good” means that other people can believe whatever they want or act how they want—and as long as they aren’t hurting others, it is seen as no problem. Two key tenets of life are exemplified in this approach: tolerance and acceptance. It doesn’t matter if they agree with others on religion, politics, whatever; it’s all good.

Religion is easy. According to most emerging adults, maintaining one’s religious life is “pretty easy,” primarily because their understanding of religion imposes no significant demands on them. For emerging adults, one takes what one wants from religion and leaves behind anything that is irrelevant or inapplicable to one’s life or that goes against one’s own sense of what is right or wrong. Emerging adults don’t want religious organizations to tell them what to do or believe, particularly on issues like gender identity, sexuality, abortion, and marriage.

Further, religion and spirituality constitute just one part of life, and not necessarily the most important one. In the end, you get—or take—what you want from religion. Again, some people are more religious, some more spiritual, but overall, whatever they are, it’s all good. And the equanimity is easy to maintain.

Morals are self-evident. Emerging adults adhere to the idea that morals and values are self-evident—you just know, or feel, what is right and wrong—even though they’re all relative. In some ways, this is related to emerging adults’ perspective on the ease of maintaining their religious and spiritual lives. Because morals and values are self-evident, they ultimately don’t present any sort of dilemma when confronted with making a moral decision—you just know.

This all sounds pretty relativistic, and in some ways it is—although there are limits. Emerging adults also say that it is not OK to cheat in order to benefit personally. But this, too, is self-evident for emerging adults because it would go against their commitment to treating others well.

No regrets. If “It’s all good” is one mantra, a related one is “No regrets.” In fact, having regrets is something that most emerging adults at least imply would be a negative thing in their lives. This seems to be related to their belief in karma, in that there is some force, or cosmic logic, that evens things out and helps make sense of the inequities and bad things that happen to a person. All of the life experiences a person has had are what have made them who they are, and if any of those were changed, they would be a different person. Certainly, some acknowledge decisions and choices they may have made that weren’t great, or things that didn’t work out, or opportunities they wish they had pursued. But, taken together, all of those experiences and decisions make a person who they are, and nobody wants to be any different from who they understand themselves to be. In turn, this helps to explain the preference among emerging adults for religion with no demands; such a religion would not require a person to confess or repent of sins or otherwise change their choices or behavior.

It would be a mistake to suggest that these various components have somehow been systematized into a set of coherent beliefs and practices, but taken together, this loose set of tenets does provide a basic perspective from which emerging adults live their lives. Although there is remarkable similarity in how this general outlook is expressed across a wide range of emerging adults, each element tends to be tailored individually, with certain elements playing larger or smaller roles in each person’s life. In the end, this cultural spirituality makes no particular demands on the individual because each individual decides how one’s life is to be lived based on one’s own needs and desires.

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