Christian Smith has been called “one of the most prolific sociologists of religion in the world” (Books & Culture, Nov/Dec, 2011). The evidence for such a judgment is easy to amass. In the three decades since he graduated from college, he has written or co-authored 15 sociological books, two theological works, and scores of book chapters and articles. As the following interview makes clear, Smith identifies himself as a sociologist, not a theologian, but in his writings, it is abundantly evident that he is a person of faith who takes the faith of others extremely seriously. That makes him both a different and strikingly interesting sociologist in a field dominated by practitioners with explicit and implicit secular assumptions.

He is best known for his award-winning work on the religious life of young people. The research includes Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood (with Kari Christoffersen, Hilary Davidson, and Patricia Snell Herzog; Oxford University Press, 2011); Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Young Adults (with Patricia Snell, Oxford University Press, 2009; it won the Lilly Fellow Book Award, 2010-2011 and Christianity Today’s 2010 Distinguished Book Award); and Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers (with Melinda Lundquist Denton; Oxford University Press, 2005; it won the Distinguished Book Award from Christianity Today in 2005. Soul Searching has sold more than 20,000 copies — a phenomenal number for an academic book).

He is also the author of a major theoretical work in sociology, What Is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and Moral Good from the Person Up (University of Chicago Press, 2010, which won the Choice 2011 Top 25
Academic Books List, an Honorable Mention in 2011 American Publisher's Award for Professional and Scholarly Excellence, Philosophy category, and the Cheryl Frank Memorial Prize for 2012 from the International Association of Critical Realism.

Smith teaches at Notre Dame, where he is the William R. Kennan, Jr. Professor of Sociology, as well as a professor in the Department of Theology, and he serves as Executive Director of the Center for Social Research.

This interview focuses primarily on Smith’s work with Patricia Snell, Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Young Adults. It is part of his continuing research on the religious lives of young people—the National Study of Youth and Religion. In this case, the book follows up on the teenagers Smith and others described in Soul Searching. They are a group of young people characterized by religious, sociological, economic, and geographical diversity—ages 18-23. They are called “emerging adults” because they usually have delayed the life choices of jobs and family that characterize adulthood. In process are additional research and publication that will take their stories to age 30.

This interview has been abridged and edited. An earlier interview with Smith was published by the website Resources for American Christianity and is available at Christian Smith on the National Study of Youth and Religion.

Q: You have done extensive, even exhaustive, research on the religious and spiritual lives of young people. What are your principal findings?

Smith: Basically, there are two. First, it is common for people to believe that the religious lives of young people are completely thrown up in the air during the teenage and emerging-adult years, that everything is up for grabs, being questioned and renegotiated. In fact, a main finding from our research emphasizes the continuity across young people’s lives when it comes to faith and practice. More often than not, most young people retain the same religious faith and roughly at the same levels of belief and practice when they are 18-23 years-old as when they were teenagers. There are large minorities of youth who decline in their religious faith and practice across that time span, and a smaller minority that increases in religiousness too. But the majority, whether they go to college or not, look a lot like they looked as teenagers. So, continuity, not change, is the dominant story. And that is well worth knowing. For one thing, it
emphasizes the importance of religious communities establishing solid education, practices, and commitments earlier in life — since what gets established at younger ages is the most likely thing to continue in later years. That's one part of the story — stability over change.

Our second finding goes back to our earlier work on teenagers — the importance of parents forming the religious and spiritual lives of their children. A lot of parents think that they don't matter any more once their kid hits teenager years, but their influence still has a huge impact on their children, for better or worse. Parents have a lot of responsibility for the religious beliefs and practices of their children, even when they pass beyond the teenage years.

**Q:** What are the implications of your findings for churches?

**Smith:** The first and major implications that runs through all our research is that it’s wrong to separate youth ministry and children ministry from adult ministry. Religion in the United States comes through the influence of families most profoundly. So, the best way to minister to children and teenagers is through their parents. The most important pastor a young person will ever have is their parent, for better or worse. Youth ministers and senior ministers need to be on the same page so that parents are encouraged to be more proactive in modeling and teaching and talking with their kids.

The second thing that matters a lot is having a youth group and a good youth group leader, as well as other adults in the congregation whom young people know and enjoy. Somebody doesn’t have to be a parent to take an interest in young people and invest in them. All that is terrifically important and has longer term consequences. It’s worth investing in young people because it sticks. It doesn't just sort of disappear or evaporate.

**Q:** What advice would you give to churches ministering to youth and young adults?

**Smith:** One of the things that has come out of our research is that young people are not being taught very well, or, if they are being taught, it isn’t getting through. There’s a lot of fuzziness and vagueness about what they believe they are supposed to believe. I think part of that is that grown ups are often times afraid to try to teach teenagers. But I think there’s a lot more opportunity and need for not necessarily sort of a super didactic
approach but one where adults and young people interact about what the real issues are, what the real beliefs of the tradition are, what the implications are. It means really hashing through the particularities of faith, rather than just having fun, playing games, eating pizza, and hoping the kids will sort of pick up faith along the way. They clearly are not picking it up along the way. There needs to be more intentional teaching.

There’s another point, and this isn’t shockingly new. Adult relationships with young people are absolutely crucial, much more than programming. A lot of times youth groups fall into a programming trap. They try to get all sorts of hip, new, or relevant programming. But what really matters and what changes people is significant relationships with mature people of faith, who are older than they are.

I also think it’s important that the leadership ministry of any congregation is really together and that the youth minister or lay adults are not subcontracted to do a separate thing. Everyone should have the same vision of formation so that what the head pastor does to form adults is good for kids, and that’s understood. The more everyone is on the same page and working together under the same strategy, everyone will be much, much more successful.

**Q:** In your research, you find that mainline Protestants and Catholics have more difficulty in maintaining the religious affiliation of young adults than other denominations. Why?

**Smith:** The answer to that is very complicated and it’s different for Catholics and mainline Protestants.

In general, if we think of the comparison groups of evangelicals, black Protestants, and Mormons, there are higher demands; there are higher expectations. The families that are part of their congregations tend to be more invested and more involved. It’s more central to their lives.

Not to over-generalize, but in a lot of mainline Protestant churches, the emphasis seems to fall on being a good citizen and being a nice person. In some ways, mainline Protestantism almost seems to inoculate its young people against itself. As children, they like it, but they don’t see much need for it once they get into their twenties. A lot of it probably comes back to the parents. Parents are always central. A lot of mainline Protestant parents actively teach their kids that you have to decide for yourself, whatever you think is fine, we don’t want to force you into anything, each person’s faith
has to be their own decision. So sometimes their children get the message that this faith doesn’t really matter and anything you think is fine. Then, they are not invested in it.

For Catholicism, it’s a complicated story of upward socio-economic mobility in the twentieth century, interacting with Vatican II and the decline of religious vocations and priests. But the bottom line is that are lot of Catholic parents are not themselves very well-educated in church teachings, so they don’t know what to tell the children. For the children, it just seems like the church is kind of a nice ethnic community that you participate in as a child. But it’s not something you have to agree to or believe in or practice when you get older.

It’s different—quite different--for Mormons and black Protestants and white evangelicals.

Q: Why do they have more success?

Smith: They have more definite and demanding theological systems and moral systems. Whether anyone agrees or disagrees with them, sociologically speaking, they are clear and more demanding. There is more centralized authority in the Scriptures or the Book of Mormon. Evangelical congregations put a lot more resources into children’s ministry and youth ministry than mainline congregations do, so it’s partly a question of investment. Among a lot of black Protestant churches, the church is much more naturally part of the community, part of people’s identity, part of family networks, even though a lot of black churches actually don’t have youth groups. The youth are still very much involved through their family, so it’s just much more a central part of family and community life. It used to be that way in the early twentieth century for Catholics, but that old pre-Vatican II, working class, urban ghetto Catholicism has mostly evaporated.

Q: For mainline Protestants and Catholics, all this emphasis on parental involvement ends up sounding like a massive guilt trip for parents.

Smith: Yes, but if the parents themselves have not been well formed, a lot of them simply don’t have the tools. If you tell them you need to teach your kid and you need to become more involved, some literally don’t know what to say. They don’t even know what the church believes.
All of this interacts with a larger cultural dynamic where parents are told in many ways that they don’t have much expertise in informing their children. Children are turned over to specialists and experts all the time in our culture, and parents assume the same thing should be true when it comes to religious matters. So they take them to youth group and expect the youth leader to take care of it. They don’t really feel authorized or equipped to know how to be a player, even though they are very important players. There’s no way to escape the fact that they are very important players.

Q: Your research shows that youth and young adults actually tilt toward the major emphases of liberal Protestantism, and yet these young adults don’t become liberal Protestants. They defect.

Smith: This is my interpretation of what’s going on. Liberal Protestantism has won the larger cultural battle, and as a result of winning the larger cultural battle, it’s losing the local, organizational battle. The mainstream of American culture has accepted liberal Protestant values of individualism, tolerance, letting people decide for themselves, not being too strict, freedom, autonomy. These are the values that liberalism has promoted for a long time. That’s pretty much won the day in the culture. For a young person who buys into all that, it is not clear why a local church is needed to promote or teach or believe that. It’s taken for granted. It’s not clear why a local church is needed to promote or teach or believe that, and it’s not evident what mainline churches have to say that’s particular or unique. If this interpretation is correct, mainline churches don’t hold on to their children because they failed, but because they persuaded everyone. There are no more battles left to fight.

Q: Is the answer that mainline Protestantism should become counter-cultural?

Smith: At this point, I always have to say I am a sociologist, not a theologian, pastor, or denominational leader. But for decades, people in the mainline Protestant denominations have been searching their souls. What is it we stand for? What is it we teach that’s different? Why does anyone need us? That’s an important discussion for any organization, and for the mainline churches I think the answer revolves around the message of the gospel—that it’s more than just tolerance and individualism. If I were being asked as a consultant, I’d encourage these churches to get back to figuring out what is the faith message, the gospel proclamation of the church, that isn’t just reducible to tolerant individualism and being a nice person:
Q: Do you think mainline Protestants and Catholics are capable of doing that without abandoning the very values that have brought them to cultural victory?

Smith: Absolutely. I think they certainly have the resources within their traditions to do that. Whether they have the organizational and political capacity to make that happen, I don’t know. The question is how will it be done, who will lead it, what will it sound like, how effective will it be, what kind of leadership will be exerted to make that happen, and that’s an open question. But there’s no way that it’s impossible. Both Catholicism and mainline Protestantism come out of long, deep, rich historical traditions that have had much, much more to say in the past than be a nice, tolerant, good upstanding member of your community. The churches should be able to go back and say that Christianity is not sort of spiritualized modernity but something distinctive. With the right kind of theological and pastoral leadership, that should be able to be pulled off.

Q: What is that distinctive message?

Smith: I would hope mainline Protestants would be able to know that already, but it seems to me it would have something to do with God reconciling the world to himself in Jesus Christ and the kind of implications that has for relationships and families, communities, and social justice. It would be firmly centering the message in redemptive salvation.

Q: The overwhelming majority of these young adults could be called spiritual, but not religious. They retain spiritual interest and even practices, such as prayer, but these don’t necessarily transfer into involvement in the church. Why is that?

Smith: American Christianity, and especially mainline Protestantism, is highly individualistic. And so, young people just don’t see the need for a church or a congregation or a community of people to be a part of, unless you want to, but you don’t have to. Their assumption is that Christian faith is something that an individual can do totally on their own. So they’ll say, oh, yeah, I’m a Christian or I’m a Baptist, or Lutheran or whatever, and then as far as they are concerned, that the end of it.
Q: And yet, they form communities in other ways.

Smith: Yes, it's ironic because in some sense, emerging adulthood is very, very much a quest for community and intimacy and connection. But very few see the church as a place for that to happen. Part of it is that emerging adults mostly spend their time with other emerging adults. There are not a lot of cross generational social ties. Since the church is a place that mixes up people of all different ages, they are less comfortable and say they would just rather hang out with their own kind.

Q: What do you predict is the religious and spiritual future of these emerging adults?

Smith: My view of the social sciences is that it is not about predicting. But if you want me to make a forecasting guess, I think different things are going to happen with different ones. Some of them are going to get older, get married, start having children, settle down, and then they will probably return to the church of their youth. Others of them won't, and probably in higher numbers than in the past, they'll just stay disconnected. They'll still consider themselves people of faith of some kind, but they won't be involved in church. And then, increasingly, there is a minority who will head in a more antagonistic direction. They'll have read about “the new atheism.” They'll think that religion is total bunk and be quite hostile to religion and church. They are not a majority; at age 18 to 23, they are really only about 10 percent, but that's more than there were in the past. But the final answer is that the future will be a whole range of different trajectories that will lead to diversity.

Q: I return again to the dilemma that confronts many churches. If they are going to be definite about their faith, that flies in the face of the kind of pluralism and diversity that they have embraced so eagerly and completely.

Smith: I want to be clear. I'm not saying churches should become sectarian or narrow or anything like that. And I'm also not saying any of this is easy. But I do think our research is helpful in sorting out what is happening to emerging adults in this phase of the American life course. It maps out the lay of the land so that religious communities and churches can reflect on it and have accurate information to sort out what they are going to do about it.
In some ways, it’s not that complicated. In some ways, it’s almost too simple. Churches should work with parents, who are parenting their kids, to think about how they can pass on the faith well. Churches should get nonparental adults in their congregations to take an interest in young people and build relationships with them and care about them and do stuff with them. Those are the two biggest factors, right there, in forming the long-term religious and spiritual lives of young people. It doesn’t necessarily require an entire denomination to make an about turn. It’s a matter of the immediate relationships of people on the ground in a congregation.

Q: What kind of leadership is necessary?

Smith: From what I can tell, there are one, two, or three people who are energized, creative, and visionary. They bring people in and delegate tasks. It’s not just business as usual. There is a creative vision of what could be, and the leaders energize people with a vision of how to be part of them and then give them the responsibility and authority to go out and do things. That seems to be crucial. If there isn’t a visionary, energetic, collaborative, delegating leader, it’s pretty hard to get anything else going.

Q: In your books, you often say that your findings about religion shed light on other aspects of American culture. What are they?

Smith: When we study teenagers and emerging adults and listen to them, they are not rebelling from the mainstream culture. They buy into the larger culture. This includes a kind of radical individualism that says each person is totally autonomous. They can believe and do and think whatever they want to, and no one else has any right to question them, much less judge them.

Another is the kind of deep moral relativism, where, it seems to me, our culture has lost a kind of common ground or common values. The consequence of that is that people believe whatever you believe is fine. There isn’t any ultimate truth, so choose whatever you want to believe, as long as you don’t hurt somebody else. It’s a radical, live and let live relativism.

Another is a super strong emphasis on the human being as a consumer. Our whole economy is built around this, and that’s how people are thinking about churches and beliefs. Since faith is a consumer commodity, they can
pick and choose what they like if it satisfies their needs, but they are the ones who should determine what it looks like for them. There isn’t any external tradition or authority that should influence them. They are in charge as consumers. That comes from the larger mass consumer culture and is infiltrating and changing Christian culture in churches.

Q: Let me shift gears a bit and become more personal. Why did you become a sociologist?

Smith: I think I’m a naturally born sociologist, in a sense. I have just the right kind of personality and set of interests for this job. So I feel really fortunate that I have landed in a profession that suits well who I am.

Q: Why sociology?

Smith: It’s mostly the perspective that sociology gives. It provides a way of understanding how the world works, what is going on in life, how it’s different than the way we often see things, how it provides insight into explaining what’s going on. I just find that incredibly enlightening. Sociology also has the capacity to inform people and better equip them to grapple with what is happening. In addition to being just intellectually fascinating, sociology can also really contribute to different kinds of groups and communities and institutions, including the churches, to sort out what they are doing and do it better.

Q: Why did you choose the sociology of religion?

Smith: From how I had been raised I knew a lot about religion and American religion, so I had a comparative advantage in the field. But I also find religion just to be, in and of itself, completely fascinating because it’s within a modern, rational, economic framework. So, it’s kind of unusual. I mean it’s not too hard to explain why people go to work or choose the careers they do. It’s a lot more interesting to figure out why people pray and believe in beings that they can’t see or immediately verify to other people. So, I just think that religion is a really sociologically fascinating subject.

Q: H. Richard Niebuhr said that the choice of a dissertation topic was essentially an ethical choice. In other words, what you study has a lot to do with deeply held values. Why did you choose to study young people?
Smith: We started with teenagers, and I realized this was a neglected area of study, especially the religious and spiritual lives of teenagers. So, there was a sort of gaping hole that I thought would be important and interesting to look into. That’s part of my larger sociological interest of trying to show the significance of religion in a lot of people’s lives, which many sociologists tend to be blind to.

Then, from a sociology of religion and a faith commitment point of view, the whole question of the transmission of faith from one generation to another is central. It’s crucial. Churches and religious traditions have the task of passing from one generation to the next the faith, organization, and leadership that shape the future. How is that done? Is it effective?

I also, as a parent, had come to increasingly believe that one of the best ways to understand what’s going on in our larger society and culture is through the lens of how we deal with and treat kids. A great way to understand the educational system or the economy or the family is to look at through the lens of what we say and what we do around young people. And so, this study of teenagers and emerging adults has also been for me a way to approach the study of American culture and society more broadly.

Q: That reminds me of an anecdote about the Herman Miller Company. When they went into a community to consider putting a plant there, they always looked at the condition of the cemeteries because they believed that how people treated the dead had a lot to do with how they treated the living.

Smith: Yes, I would certainly say that. I think you could even broaden it out further—to say how a culture treats its more vulnerable members tells a lot about its true commitments and interests and values.

Q: In your book, What Is a Person?, you offer a sharp critique of much of contemporary sociology, including the sociology of religion. I think you are basically arguing for the humanizing of social scientific inquiry. What’s wrong with contemporary sociology and what should be done about it?

Smith: The basic argument of that book and some others that I’ve written is that the models of human beings that social sciences use are impoverished. They are just really poor representations of what humans really are. There are different versions of what social sciences assume
about humans, but as far as I can tell, they are all a problem. I am trying to argue that if we want good social science, we need a richer and thicker and more realistic understanding of what humans are. There’s a kind of thickness or richness to personhood that needs to be accounted for if we are going to do good social science and honor what people really are. A different model of what a person is and a different philosophy of social science can reshape social science to be more realistic, more grounded in reality, and more adequate in its explanations.

Q: That reality, as I understand you, would include, for example, things like the reality of love and the reality of belief in God.

Smith: Yes. Many social scientists will say, yes, it’s real that people believe in God. But at another level, social scientists are highly skeptical about people’s beliefs. What I would like to push would have a much more thick, humanistic notion of what human life is about. It involves much more sense of substantive goods, substantive goals, including love and community and morality and so on, which a lot of social scientists ignore and can’t even image how they would talk about, especially love.

As far as I am concerned, love is at the center of all human relationships. Even when love is done well or it’s abused, nobody could thrive or even survive as a human without a certain amount of love. And yet, somehow, that’s a word that’s taboo in social science. Tell me how that’s supposed to work?

Q: You’ve been enormously productive during your academic career. If it all came to an end, how would like to be remembered?

Smith: I think there are two major legacies I would love to have, if possible. One is centered around the National Study of Youth and Religion. I hope that the research we’ve done genuinely helped transform communities of faith so they were more effective with young people.

The other is that I would love if my theoretical work on sociology and personhood would contribute to a long-term transformation of social science to make it more adequate in describing human life. I’d love it, if, after I’m long dead, people would look back and say that something that made a difference in the way social science is developed was the kind of theoretical arguments that were made back then.
Since you asked the question, that’s the honest answer.

Q: I hope in both cases you’re right.

Smith: Thank you.