Chapter Three

Portraits of Three Generations

Identity, Life Experience, and Religion

"Each generation is a new people," observed Alexis de Tocqueville when he visited the United States in the 1830s. Coming from France, Tocqueville was struck by the freedom people had in this country to recreate and shape anew the American experience. In a country built upon principles of democracy and individualism—and unlike the more tradition-oriented, hierarchically based European nations—changes from generation to generation were much more obvious. Of course, Tocqueville was far from alone in observing the malleability and evolving character of American society. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, commentators repeatedly pointed to populist trends in American life, noting the diversity of ideas and organization, the powerful force of public opinion, an emphasis on needs and experiences of the people, and fluidity of grassroots attitudes and sentiments. Rather than tradition, authority, or divine revelation, pragmatics in its many forms is a powerful driving force shaping all of society, including its religious life. Nor has the country lost this quality. Recent commentators such as William Strauss and Neil Howe underscore the point made by Tocqueville and others when they say that in America there is continuing, strong susceptibility "to generational flux, to the fresh influence of each new set of youth come to age."[1]

What has long impressed commentators is subtle change in values, mood, and sentiment—the cultural orientations that in one way or another shape people's views and experiences. Each successive generation in America develops to a greater or lesser extent its own distinctive personality and thereby reshapes the nation and its future. Religion is very much bound up with a people's mood, values, and emotions; thus it too is always in a state of flux and evolving. The configuration of meaning and interpretation—what anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls "webs of significance"—inevitably varies depending upon social circumstance and the life experience in question. This being the case, we are led to look carefully at the three generations that form the centerpiece of this book. How different are the pre-boomers, boomers, and generation Xers in their social and religious profiles? What are the major religious differences between the generations, and between which generations? On what issues do the generations differ most, and on what least?

To answer these questions, we make use in this chapter of both the interview materials and the survey data collected in southern California and North Carolina. Here we paint a portrait in broad strokes of the three generations, focusing on generational identity; social and family background; and religious beliefs, attitudes, and practices, leaving for the next chapter explicit attention to involvement in the congregation.

Generational Identity

To begin with, we look at generational identity. As was discussed in the Introduction, the notion of generation is intuitively obvious, yet somewhat elusive as a basis of self-definition because there is so little consensus with regard to label. Consider the many events and experiences that, for example, pre-boomers living today remember as having a formative influence upon them when they were young. Depending on whom you ask within this generation, some of those events had a far greater impact upon them than did others. Even so, survey research has uncovered considerable statistical consensus on the major defining events for pre-boomers: the Great Depression, World War II, and in the case of Jews the Holocaust.[2] Much consensus also holds for boomers who remember the disruptive and event-

ful 1960s and 1970s, although in the case of generation Xers there is somewhat less agreement as to formative events and developments. For them, there simply have not been the decisive and unforgettable markers that stand out for the other two generations.

As a generation gets older, how it views the past is influenced by selective memory and shared stories. That is to say, a generation's identity is to a considerable extent a narrative construction as people age and look back upon and interpret their experiences. An individual's own story is cast within a larger story of the cultural markers defining a generation's experience. Certainly the Great Depression and World War II are crucial to the stories now told by pre-boomers, but so too are features of the popular culture remembered from the 1920s and 1930s. Narrative constructions, often enhanced by film and television, create for this generation a common identity and sense of belonging; media representations of the past help as well to reinforce the distinctiveness of a generation's experience and to define it over against others. This comes through in the response of a seventy-three-year-old man who was asked about what made his generation unlike others:

> Well, the fact that most of us grew up in the Depression, and that's something you all can't grasp because you weren't there. We also went through World War II and that binds people together. . . . I was watching *South Pacific* the other night on TV. I don't know if you can relate to those boys on that island, those nurses . . . that's my generation. You know, half of them [the soldiers] didn't come back, and if they did they were wounded, and it's something that makes you relate to each other. And then the swing period, the music also keeps you going. And the next generation down can't feel that, I don't think.

Memories and emotions are powerful, which may explain why the pre-boomers we interviewed were more likely to say they belonged to a particular generation than either the boomers or generation Xers. Fifty-five percent of pre-boomers in our survey agreed. Somewhat fewer boomers, slightly less than half, said so. Only 31 percent of generation Xers felt they belonged to a distinctive generation. No doubt age is a crucial factor in explaining depth of belonging. But also, many in the younger generations are sensitive to what is said in the media about them and are often likely to distance

themselves from it. So they reject such labels outright, or offer a cautious, more reserved definition of themselves. For example, a thirty-four-year-old Catholic responded to the question about generational belonging by saying he was "certainly aware of the generation X stuff" but qualified his answer by noting that he did not have any "deep knowledge of it." Having grown up in the shadow of the boom generation, which received so much attention because of their huge number and claims of having lived through the turbulent 1960s, many Xers simply resent being categorized as an "unknown" generation or as busters, with a seemingly diminished profile. This means they are less likely to think in generational terms.

Pre-boomers are more likely to say they belong to a generation, yet they are the least likely of the three generations to agree upon a label describing them. When those saying they belonged to a generation were asked to name it, the majority of pre-boomers identified themselves as the "senior citizen" generation, though some also mentioned being in the "fifties," "World War II," or "Depression" generation. Their identity is bound up with many shared historical experiences. In contrast, boomers and generation Xers were more likely to recognize themselves by using ahistorical labels. The overwhelming majority of boomers identified themselves as such, although some referred to themselves as the "sixties" generation. Whatever else may define them, they have known from the time they were children that they had numbers on their side; after all, they got their name because of a demographic boom. Similarly, more than half of Xers who identified themselves generationally did so by referring to themselves as generation Xers or baby busters. A small number spoke of themselves simply as the "modern" generation. Thus both the aging process and choice of label contribute to a generation's distinctive consciousness. With labels attached to generations, there is more than just an issue of majority consensus; there is a positive or negative valence surrounding them.

Family Experiences

As we saw in Chapter One, family-related changes are crucial to our understanding of a generation and its experience. The magnitude and sheer pace of change over the past half-century are staggering, producing chaos and shock; some people become caught up in nos-

talgia for a way of life that no longer exists and concerns about moral decay and family values, while others celebrate the individual freedom and choice they now enjoy. These family-type changes, too, overlap with the lives of the three generations we are examining in this book. Pre-boomers and the oldest wave of boomers remember the television programs of the 1950s and 1960s that celebrated the American dream of a happy, secure family life: "Father Knows Best," "Leave It to Beaver," "The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet." Even then, TV did not portray how most Americans actually lived, but as sociologist Arlene Skolnick points out it gave us images of "idealized families in idealized settings, successfully masquerading as 'normal,' 'healthy,' 'typical,' 'average.'"[3]

Many within the boom generation grew up recognizing the mismatch between a Norman Rockwell America held up as an ideal and the strains that families faced in actual, everyday life. Those were years of cultural confusion and stress, of changing norms governing intimate relationships and family patterns; white middle-class youths in particular felt this tension since many of them had parents who held deeply to conventional expectations of, and dreams for, a future family that would resemble what they had known in the past. Every generation knows some disparity between cultural ideals and realities, but this generation especially was caught in its grip.

If boomers felt the stress of an impending rupture, it would be the gen Xers who would feel the pains of family disruption. Forty-five percent of this younger post–World War II generation (as compared with 26 and 23 percent of boomers and pre-boomers, respectively) experienced either divorce or separation of their parents or were raised by a single parent. The level of family disruption while growing up is slightly higher in California than in North Carolina, but not by much; the family as an institution everywhere was in disarray. Statistics substantiate the fact that in the 1970s and 1980s especially change within the family was omnipresent. Divorce, births out of wedlock, and the absence of the father within the family all spiraled during these years.

These trends in family patterns are often associated with boomers, but it is really the generation following them who from the time they were children have known, more than any other, about single mothers, illegitimacy, and absent fathers. They grew up with the label dysfunctional family bandied about, and it signaled a deep message

to them. Even if both parents were in the home, most likely they were the children of two-job families—yet another trend that marked the gen X experience. In our interviews, boomers often talked about, and at times celebrated, their experience in alternative family arrangements. But it was the Xers who experienced growing up without emotional support from their parents; they were most likely to express those feelings of loss.

The shift in family experience occurred rather quickly for those born at the tail end of the boomer generation and for older Xers, and not without subtle, far-reaching psychological consequences. A Catholic we spoke with in North Carolina, forty-one at the time, described just how much the world had changed between the times when she and her sister, just nine years older, were in high school: "When she was in high school, you know if you got caught smoking in the bathroom you were in big trouble. When I was in high school there were girls going to school who were pregnant, and there were kids getting stoned on the football field. So a lot had changed. Things were very much more open. When she was a teenager, if a girl got pregnant they sent her away to somewhere and she had the baby and they gave it up. It was different, just totally different."

Her account testifies not just to a changing school setting but to a shift in sexual norms, drugs, and family expectations. With "things . . . much more open," as she says, people become more vulnerable psychologically, as evident in themes of abandonment and loneliness so common in the popular culture and music for this youngest sector of adult Americans. National surveys suggest they have become more negative than older persons about people and human nature. Having lost trust in people and institutions, they feel disconnected from society. Some express worry about the prospect of a happy marriage, though in general they are not necessarily more pessimistic about their personal lives.[4]

Just as families themselves have changed, so too has the nexus between family and religion. Pre-boomers are most likely to report having parents who were involved in congregations when they were growing up, generation Xers the least. This is not very surprising, although the differences across the generations are not huge and should not be exaggerated. Anecdotal evidence from our interviews suggests that in every generation an intact family is inclined to report parental religious involvement, but the catch is, there is a declining

proportion of such families across the three generations. It is likely as well that retrospective measures for one's parents are subject to bias in reporting and that older persons are more sentimental or nostalgic when thinking about their parents as moral and religious role models than younger persons. Although the actual level of religious involvement appears not to have declined greatly, probably normative expectations of religious involvement have declined. Pre-boomers were more likely to tell us they had parents who brought them up to attend church or were religiously observant than either boomers or generation Xers.

There are subtle psychological religious changes as well bound up with the shift in the family-religion nexus. Whereas pre-boomers often still have warm feelings about togetherness and a time when the congregation was filled with intact families and children, many younger Americans have not had this depth of experience. These latter report more bad experiences with both family and religion. Some boomers remember the church of their childhood and often go looking for a congregation partly in search of "family talk"[5] (discourse driven by rich memories and emotions) but are often frustrated by what they find. The gap between memory and actual family experience is overshadowing. For still other boomers and many generation Xers, there is a recognized need for community even though organized religion does not always provide what they are looking for.

Because they have been deprived in stable primary relationships, many do however look to cultivate close, personal ties within a religious community. As one thirty-four-year-old North Carolinian told us, reflecting upon her generation's emotional deprivation and difficulty in settling down as adults, "we are concerned about relationships and especially value friendships and community." Many in her age cohort talk of hanging out with friends—a rhetoric arguably born out of loneliness and deep hunger to belong. Identity can become deeply rooted within a close social network, including that formed within a religious community. Whether one's personal identity is transformed in a congregation or in another type of religious fellowship greatly depends, as sociologist Richard W. Flory says, on the opportunity for "creating a more or less unique individual identity that is rooted in the confines of the religious community."[6] Striking a balance between shared faith and individual freedom is necessary, in which instance the religious group takes on qualities of

a healthy surrogate family. A good family is one that nurtures both togetherness and personal development. This type of loose connection is evident in lifestyle enclaves such as gay and lesbian support groups where individuals deal with their own struggles; in Latino, Asian, or other ethnic congregations organized around heritage but that also encourage individual initiative; and in Shabbat services for Jewish singles where members share a great deal of common life yet are able to express their individuality. It also happens in more conventional religious settings under the right conditions. An atmosphere of openness, opportunity for sharing group experiences, respect for one another's spiritual journey, and ease in locating oneself in a larger religious narrative are all essential.

At a time when grand narratives reflecting a unified vision of reality are suspect, a strong religious identity is possible if there is an experiential approach to knowledge and recognition of the truth and insights arising out of a distinctive sociobiography. Commenting on his Sunday school class, comprising mainly generation Xers, a twenty-eight-year-old United Methodist says, "We're a very open group and I think as far as keeping an open doctrine St. Luke [his parish] does that. . . . We can disagree in a respectful way; you know not everybody agrees and we're not going to agree. I think the difference is, not taking the ideas personally, but trying to keep in focus that we're all together in the family of Christ regardless of race, sex, politics—Christianity transcends all those boundaries. And I think that is something that I feel St. Luke has upheld, and certainly the group that I identify with."

Noteworthy is the "family" image. Religious community is like a family in the sense of caring and sharing, and in the importance of close attachments and a feeling of belonging. Religious community is like a family in the sense that the bonds holding it together arise out of deep feelings and rest not just upon dogmatic affirmation or creed.[7] Community rests less upon right thinking than upon shared activity and experience. Under such conditions, the chances are that an individual will take on a communal identity and recognize the importance of suppressing disagreement in the interest of accepting and supporting one another. Like a family, a congregation of this sort may not avoid controversy but still have the resources to minimize its disruptive potential. Asked about homosexuality, for example, this same Methodist comments, "We be-

lieve as Methodists it is wrong, it is a moral wrong; however, even though it is wrong, we are not in any position to be condemning. We are not in a position to be better than another person. We are all subjects to Christ and everybody is deserving of that grace and of that service. . . . We don't promote that lifestyle but then again, we're not condemning as well."

The comment suggests an affinity between close congregational bonding and religious style among those most deeply committed. Suspicious of hegemonic versions of absolute truth, many Americans born after World War II work at reconciling their values and lifestyles in relation to religious teaching but insist upon honoring and preserving the truth that arises out of subjective knowing. This latter mode of knowing, as opposed to propositional truth, privileges feeling, intuition, relationship, pluralism, and perhaps most of all idiosyncratic insight from human experience. It is an epistemology that cautions against rigid dogmatics and moralizing. Not that the search for higher forms of knowledge and moral principles above those found in individual experience should be abandoned, but subjective and pragmatic truth is now understood by many young Americans as integral to meaningful religious life.[8] Any congregation that would relate to them must grasp this fundamental point.

Religious Identification: Past and Present

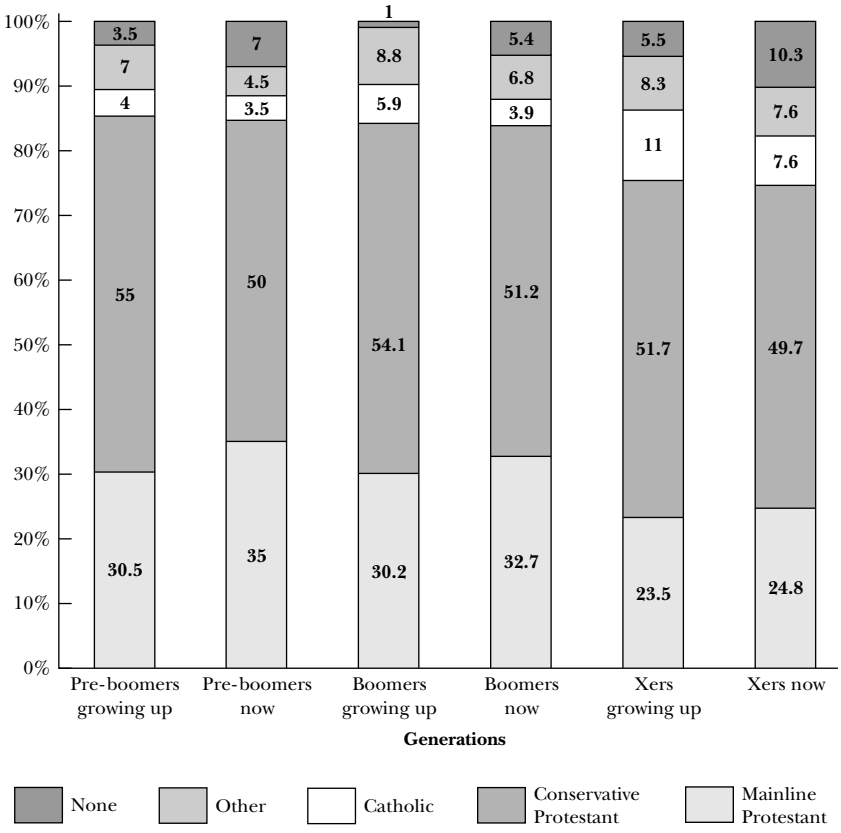
Compared with most modern societies, in the United States the level of religious belief and activity remains quite high. Affiliation or identification with a religious organization is remarkably high within the country, unlike in many parts of Europe. Polls and surveys find that roughly 90 percent of Americans continue to identify with some religious group or tradition. Over the period of the nation's history, the proportion holding membership in a church, synagogue, temple, or mosque has actually increased. At the same time, there have been some important shifts in religious involvement among recent generations. According to the National Opinion Research Center (NORC), national surveys over the past quarter century show that the young today score lower on a number of religious indicators than did Americans of a similar age twenty or thirty years ago; they attend weekly religious services less often, are less likely to identify with a particular religion, and are less prone to believe that the world

reflects God's goodness. An exception to this downward trend is that youths are more likely to believe in an afterlife now than was previously true.[9] As measured by this item, the young are actually more religious today than even the oldest cohorts of Americans—itself a fascinating observation. If nothing more, it underscores the fact that one should be careful in making any simple, sweeping interpretation of religious change in the United States.

It is often said that the United States is a denominational society, that religious identity remains particularly important for reasons both historical and cultural. Now, as has long been true, the great majority of Americans claim a religious affiliation and find it easy to describe themselves as Catholic, Jewish, Presbyterian, Southern Baptist, or some such label. More than just a personal belief system, or set of faith commitments, religion plays a role in helping Americans define and locate themselves socially, which is especially important because it is freely chosen in a voluntary religious order. That is to say, belonging—not just meaning—is integral to religion in a highly pluralist society where religion offers a large set of communal structures readily available for identifying oneself. Americans also switch from one faith tradition or denomination to another fairly often, and seemingly do so with a good deal of ease. The prevalence of so much switching suggests pragmatic, individualistic religious styles, often related more to social circumstance and life situation than to ecclesiastical or doctrinal commitments. Still, there is considerable evidence to suggest that for many people religious switching involves a conscious and responsible decision and is not to be viewed as necessarily reflecting lack of a faith commitment.

What about generational trends in religious identification? This is an important question, one that goes to the heart of religious change in the United States. With respect to the public role of religion in the country, few indicators give us a better clue as to what is happening within the culture at large, and over time, than the broad shift in patterns of religious preference. This is clear from the trends evident in Figures 3.1 and 3.2. Shown are tabulations from the basic questions: "What, if any, is your present denomination or faith tradition? Which religious denomination do you personally feel closest to?" and "Which religious denomination did you personally feel closest to growing up?" By comparing responses to these two questions, tapping people's views now and when growing up, we arrive

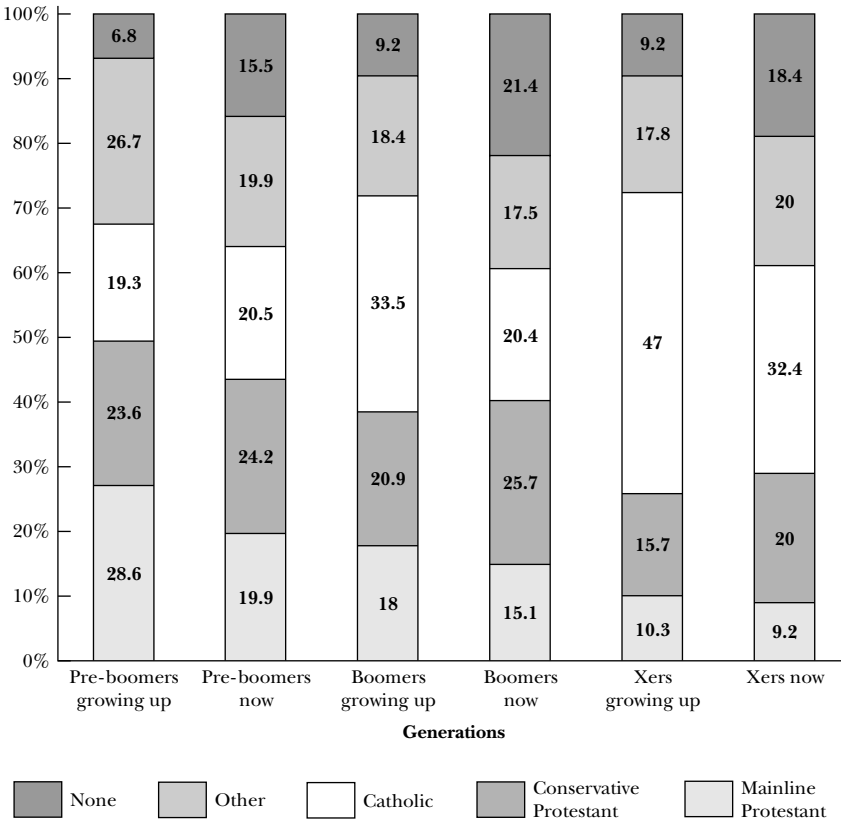
Figure 3.1. Religious Background and Current Preference, Three Generations: North Carolina.



at a measure of the extent of the shift in popular preferences and the direction of those changes. The figures depict trends for Roman Catholics, conservative Protestants, mainline Protestants, other religions, and none, for the North Carolina and southern California samples. We found it necessary to omit from the analysis respondents belonging to historic African American denominations because there were too few cases to break out by generation or state.

Several observations can be made. First, there is a discernible shift to "none" for all three generations. For pre-boomers as well as generation Xers, the proportion roughly doubled toward "none"

Figure 3.2. Religious Background and Current Preference, Three Generations: California.



from the time they grew up to the present. By far, the greatest shift in these preferences occurred with boomers. Countercultural trends for that generation continue to show up in surveys. The proportion generally claiming no preference is considerably higher in California, but the trends vary for the two states. Whereas in North Carolina there is the predictable pattern of Xers currently rejecting organized religion more so than boomers, in California the reverse actually holds. Though many Xers claim no religious affiliation, they are overshadowed in this state by the huge number of boomers also having made that choice.

Second, for Catholics there are two interesting trends. The overall proportion growing up Catholic has increased with each generation—not surprising in view of considerable Latino immigration. In California, a staggering 47 percent of the Xer population grew up Catholic. In North Carolina, 11 percent of Xers grew up Catholic, higher actually than might be expected in a southern Protestant environment. Except for pre-boomers in California, current preference for Catholicism is less than when growing up. The decline in Catholic preference is relatively minor for pre-boomers in North Carolina, but considerable for boomers and generation Xers in both states. Without doubt, the greatest break in identification comes between pre-boomers and boomers, consistent with what some commentators have said about the impact that Vatican II has had on Catholic youth during the mid-1960s.[10] Data here make for a strong argument about generational-based religious change.

Third, the number growing up in a mainline Protestant tradition has declined proportionately across the three generations, and especially in California. Hardly news anymore, the fate of this once well-entrenched religious and cultural establishment is one of the big stories of religious change in the United States during the latter half of the twentieth-century. Particularly striking is the large decline for generation Xers currently identifying with moderate-to-liberal Protestant denominations: 9.2 percent in California and 24.8 percent in North Carolina. The religious environments for the two states are obviously different, which is also apparent in switching trends: pre-boomers, boomers, and generation Xers all switch into these high-status denominations in North Carolina, but in California they switch out. A mainline Protestant establishment exists in this decidedly "low-church" southern state that is respected and attractive, especially for those who are upwardly mobile.

Fourth, a conservative Protestant tradition is espoused by half the population in North Carolina, but less than one-fourth within California. Trends for the two states differ significantly: with the former there is some slight decline in current preference compared to the number growing up within these faith traditions, whereas in the latter there is a marked increase in such preference, especially among boomers and generation Xers. Popular evangelicalism has grown rapidly in California over the past half century, although in a highly pluralistic and individualistic ethos not all switchers necessarily

accept the doctrines of the tradition into which they switch.[11] Not just conservative Protestant denominations benefit from this popular trend; so too do many independent, nondenominational and community churches that promise a return to primitive religious teachings without the cultural and theological baggage often associated with denominational heritage. Again, the evidence points to major generational-based changes in the religious landscape.

Fifth, generational trends for non-Christian, non-Jewish religious and spiritual traditions differ for the two states. Contrary to expectation, the proportion growing up in other religions has declined across the three generations within California. Historically, the state has been receptive to religious imports from Asia and elsewhere, and a seedbed for new syncretistic religious movements. In North Carolina, there has been a slight increase in preference for other religions. In both states, there is a pattern for people who grew up in other traditions to shift preference later in life, except among generation Xers in California. Of course, the latter have had fewer years in which to change their preference, but at present fully 20 percent of the members of this generation in this state embrace a faith or spirituality belonging to the "other religions" category. This may signal a more established non-Christian, non-Jewish religious sector in a state already known for its span of religious possibilities.

Religious Involvement

To gain further perspective on generational styles of religious involvement, we asked several questions in our surveys. We inquired into current religious involvement using multiple items all having to do with such institutionally prescribed religious practices as attendance at worship services, Sabbath, or Sunday school; prayer; Bible or Scripture study; and participation in a men or women's group within a congregation. Although religion is hardly limited to such expression, what is publicly defined as religious in a society and thus highly institutionalized is important to study. Combining items into a scale, we find significant differences by generation in the direction we would expect: pre-boomers the most involved, boomers next, and generation Xers the least. Fully half of the pre-

boomers are "very religious" on our scale, compared to 36 percent of boomers, and 26 percent of generation Xers. As already noted, evidence from various sources shows that the greatest break in religious involvement occurs between pre-boomers and the two younger generations.

We consider religious involvement in more detail in the following chapter. Here, however, we want to look especially at self-reported changes in religious involvement. One obvious predictor of a person's current involvement in a religious group is the extent of his or her religious involvement growing up. People whose parents brought them up within a faith, or who choose it on their own when they are young, tend to remain active in later years; that is to say, youthful religious exposure is likely to stick even if predicting when it might reassert itself is impossible. It is but one of many factors of course shaping a person's involvement in a congregation.

But does religion's early sticking power vary for the generations? Our rather limited evidence suggests that to some extent it does. Forty-five percent of pre-boomers who were "somewhat" or "very" involved religiously when growing up are now "very religious," as measured on our multi-item scale. By comparison, only 32 percent of boomers who were religiously involved when growing up now fit into this most active religious category, and only 26 percent of generation Xers do so.

It may be that in time, as the younger generations pass through the life cycle, they will approach the level of religious involvement observed for pre-boomers; should this be the case, then life cycle better explains these patterns than does generation. However, studies of religious change lead us to suspect that organized religion's sticking power may have declined somewhat over time. The NORC surveys previously mentioned point to declines in involvement for the young of this sort in the period since 1985. Other evidence suggests that many boomers actually drop out of active involvement in church, synagogue, or temple in midlife once their own children grow up, a pattern that goes against the more traditional life-course expectation that people having raised their children in a congregation remain active throughout their lives.[12] Generations vary in religious expression and especially so in how they relate to congregational life.

Beliefs About God

An important battery of questions in our survey had to do with God, both belief in God and discerning the presence of God in everyday life. Both types of question have proved to be promising in religious research. Previous studies show that Americans are quite diverse in their images of God, and they also underscore a great deal of variation in the strength of conviction. The vast majority of Americans of all ages say they believe in God, however what they mean when they say that and how intensely they hold to such belief is an open matter. Research makes clear that the setting and life circumstance in which people experience the presence of God vary a great deal. The great psychologist of a century ago, William James, spoke of the "triggers" of religious experience; what may be a trigger for one person is not necessarily so for someone else. We know that religious imagination is crucial to the power of faith and wide-ranging in its sweep and also that the depth and breadth of the imagery is deeply influenced by a person's life situation and by selective appropriation of the content of a particular religious tradition. Hence it is difficult to generalize about the imagery that comes into play describing a person's meaningful relation with God or the sacred, but we can reasonably expect some difference by generation.

On the question about belief in God, the responses are interesting for what they tell us both about similarity and difference for the generations. Eighty-eight percent of all respondents indicate they definitely believe in God or a Higher Power. Pre-boomers are more likely to report a definite belief in God, at 90 percent; boomers are next at 89 percent, and generation Xers are at 84 percent. As such, the differences are quite small. A somewhat more striking contrast turns up when we look at strength of belief. Generation Xers report they are "uncertain" in their belief, at 15 percent (19 percent in California), followed by boomers at 10 percent and pre-boomers at 9 percent. Boomers and pre-boomers are three times as likely to say they are uncertain but "lean toward believing"; generation Xers are more closely divided on whether to believe or not to believe. Again, sorting out how much of this is generation and how much is age, or life cycle, is impossible.

But clearly there is an expanding sector of young Americans who openly acknowledge their uncertainty in theistic belief, yet who are

seriously exploring and debating within themselves what to believe. Abstract formulations of deity seem cold, distant, and unconvincing to them; experience and feelings are the means of discerning the reality and presence of God. "Generation X is the first postmodern worldview generation," a pastor of an evangelical church in California told us. Commenting on the younger members in his congregation and their epistemological skepticism, he notes that "they are a little more flexible in their views. I think a lot of them are still searching and haven't become dogmatic yet." Only 2 percent of the respondents in our survey say they "don't believe in God or a Higher Power," more of them proportionately boomers than for either of the other two generations. In California—a trend-setting state culturally and religiously—a greater number in every generation say they don't believe than is the case in North Carolina; but patterns of overwhelming belief or considerable uncertainty and a small number of atheistic responses are much the same. Region of the country is important in understanding religion, but more important it seems is generational change.

More than 90 percent in our survey believe that God is personally involved in their lives. Interestingly, the difference by generation here is not statistically significant. Boomers are slightly less likely than either of the other two generations to claim personal involvement with God. Over the past several decades, there has been a movement within religious communities to recover the personal and experiential—as spiritual style and as mode of religious knowing—and many Americans, including young Americans, seem to be rejuvenated. Call them postmodern, as does the pastor just quoted, or simply having undergone a shift in cognitive universe, away from the objective toward the subjective, away from the doctrinal to the spiritual, from the head to the heart. What appears to be happening is that in all generations—but perhaps most strikingly among generation Xers—people find, as one commentator says, "the religious in personal experience" and as a result of a "constant yearning, both implicit and explicit, for the almost mystical encounter of the human and the divine."[13] No doubt the person saying this is correct in pointing out, too, the emphasis upon the personal has close affinity with the sense of freedom and responsibility they feel in regard to managing their own spiritual lives. Truth, however defined, must be validated by experience; it

must give assurance to believers they can trust their own lead and follow their judgment. Without this, no matter how dogmatically it is proclaimed, it risks becoming hollow.

Where do people experience the presence of God or a spiritual power? There are some differences as reported by the generations, but by and large similarity across generations outweighs whatever contrast there may be. Pre-boomers are actually more likely to say they experience the presence of God or a spiritual power while meditating than either boomers or generation Xers are. This may be surprising, given all that has been said about boomers and their interest in meditation in their earlier years, but such practices have come to be widely diffused in the United States. Boomers do engage in meditation at present more than Xers. Pre-boomers are most inclined (and boomers next) to report a spiritual experience during a moment of great joy, in sorrow or tragedy, in nature, while reading an inspirational book, or in acts of service to others. Deeply embedded cultural narratives in America define these settings and activities as conducive to experience with the divine or the sacred. It may be that pre-boomers report a greater number of such experiences simply because of their age, and thus exposure to such narratives. Some research suggests that as people age, they have more mystical and paranormal experiences.

With regard to feeling the presence of God in a worship service, there are no significant differences by generation. This may seem surprising considering that pre-boomers would likely have greater affinity with a worship service than the other generations. But worship service is not restricted to a conventional church: many people we spoke with belonged to megachurches that had contemporary services, or attended folk masses, or were members of an informal fellowship often meeting in people's homes, and all were quite likely to say they encountered the presence of God in such a setting. Worship is hardly limited to a particular form. Generation Xers stand out in their claims of having a spiritual encounter when visiting a shrine or other sacred place, and in the significance they attach to dreams, visions, and encounters of one sort or another. Almost half say they have had such an encounter of this kind, and almost a quarter report feeling a spiritual presence in dreams, visions, or revelations. Miracle, epiphany, prophecy, signs, and other claims of supernatural encounter all fit into their more open, engaging approach to piec-

ing together religious notions from a variety of sources and their emphasis on the deeply personal, experiential aspects of religion. They attach more importance to exploring differing religious teachings, and to learning from them, than do even the boomers, who were often labeled as spiritual dabblers when growing up. It appears they are reclaiming primitive encounters and experiences that are associated historically with faith and spirituality but that often are downplayed within the religious establishment. In this respect, religious heritage is a resource that is being rediscovered.

Religious Individualism

Much has been written about religious individualism in American life. Historically, this has been the way Americans typically approach religion, although many observers argue that the level of personal autonomy has increased in the period since World War II. What we do know is that the post–World War II generations express greater individualism in matters of faith than was true for those born in the twentieth century prior to that watershed period. The argument some years ago by Bellah and colleagues about religious subjectivity and attention to self in this period—what they called "Sheilaism"[14]—is not without merit. For example, when asked about whether "an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any church or religious group," 47 percent of generation Xers, 40 percent of boomers, and 34 percent of pre-boomers "strongly agree." Not surprisingly, endorsement of religious individualism is greater overall in California than in North Carolina, but the spread on this question is unambiguous in both states. So clear a trend in two quite dissimilar states within the country reveals what is an unquestioned religious reality today: Americans want—indeed, insist upon—great latitude in arriving at their beliefs.

Other items yield similar conclusions. When asked whether "a religious person should follow his or her conscience, even if it means going against what his or her religious tradition teaches," 60 percent of both generation Xers and boomers agree, compared to 52 percent of pre-boomers. Asked if "the rules about morality preached by most religious groups today are just too restrictive," 42 percent of generation Xers strongly agreed; 30 percent of boomers and 27 percent of pre-boomers did. On yet another strongly-worded item

("People who have God in their lives don't need a church or religious group"), 44 percent of generation Xers, 40 percent of boomers, and 35 percent of pre-boomers agreed. Combining positive responses to these four items to create a scale on religious individualism, we find a decisive spread in mean scores: 3.3 for generation Xers, 3.0 for boomers, and 2.8 for pre-boomers. Religious individualism finds expression in every age, but for many younger Americans it is defended as a religious style. It might even be said that this is an example of a "period effect," when Americans of every generation are deeply touched by an individualistic religious ethos; yet it is clear that gen Xers, at least at this moment in their lives, embody the trends more so than the other two generations.

Even so, there are countertrends that deserve attention. The trend away from excessive individualism is most apparent when comparing generation Xers and boomers in their involvement in organized religion. Whereas 50 percent of boomers say a religious congregation is very important in their life, 53 percent of generation Xers say the same. Obviously this is a small gap, yet it is significant that the Xers are also more likely than members of the generation immediately before them to say they have "a great deal" of confidence in churches and organized religion. Similarly, they express a greater level of trust in the U.S. Congress, the U.S. Supreme Court, and organized labor. Again, differences between the generations on these questions are by no means huge, but the consistency of responses cannot be overlooked. They point to some shift away from the high level of alienation and distrust of social institutions associated with boomers.

If there is an explanation of this slight reversal in trends it is that though generation Xers are highly individualistic in spiritual styles, they also yearn for religious community, for the support and nurturing that can come from the presence of others who share similar commitments. It is important, too, that gen Xers are much more likely to be involved in a congregation that makes use of media such as popular music, video, and art, thereby offering culturally current and engaging opportunities for sharing and worship. The importance of this observation lies not simply in the powers of communication and conviction that come with accommodating faith messages to what is culturally current. It may be that in such a setting anti-institutional sentiment is deflected, and communal identity and

participation are greatly enriched, with the result that religious involvement takes on greater affect and a more positive sense of group belonging.[15] If so, we then have to conclude that the religious culture of a generation is puzzling, even paradoxical at times. Xers in some congregations may have more in common with pre-boomers than they do with many alienated, anti-institutional boomers. Broadly speaking, it also means that the relationship between individualism and community is complex indeed, and hardly one to be characterized as zero-sum.

The Churched and the Unchurched

In this final section of the chapter, we look at the churched and unchurched populations for the three generations. It is a distinction often drawn by sociologists of religion pointing to two quite divergent cultures in the United States, one communally oriented and closely tied to a church, temple, synagogue, mosque, or other religious institution; and the other less religiously based and oriented to personal freedom. Often the distinction is used to describe a growing divide between "traditional-religious" and "cosmopolitan-modernist" cultures.[16] Whereas the former is identified with family and conventional moral values rooted within a faith tradition, the latter is much more oriented to secular, technological values and more receptive of social and cultural change. Commentators note that such a divide is reinforced by the expansion in higher education and the changing values, orientations, and lifestyles over the past half century. As we saw with the participation patterns discussed earlier in this chapter, pre-boomers have a higher proportion of members belonging to the churched culture than either of the other two generations.

The churched population is more conventional and traditional-minded than the unchurched across all three generations. Questions we asked inquiring into the respondent's attitude toward social, political, economic, religious, and personal moral issues all revealed, quite predictably, the churched population to be more conservative. Contrary to what we might have expected, we do not find greater divergence between the two cultures among the youngest Americans. Moral and religious boundaries obviously change from generation to generation, but the statistical spread in views and attitudes between

the churched and the unchurched seems not to have increased much. The stable churched culture is diminished in size for both boomers and generation Xers, but perhaps more important for the latter especially is a trend cutting across that generation toward somewhat greater moral and political traditionalism. For sure, there is no evolving, ever-widening gap between the churched and unchurched cultures of the sort that proponents of secularization would argue. American religion is much too fluid, evolving, and populist-based for so simple an analysis.

Religious themes are blurred across the churched-unchurched divide since love of God and religious faith, practice, and charity cannot be contained within the walls of organized religion. This is very much the situation with Xers, the generation most in the news at present and the most paradoxical religious in terms. When Catholic writer Tom Beaudoin says that the most common sentence he heard in his interviews with members of this generation was "If you want to talk about church, I'm not very interested," clearly he is describing the unchurched who, as he says, are irreverent, deeply skeptical, and suspicious of religious institutions, yet religious often in their own way.[17] At the cultural extreme, they mark themselves by tattoos and body piercings, sending a visible message of their opposition to the conventional styles of the traditional religious community; theirs is a strong signal to the effect they are not Wuthnow's dwellers settled comfortably into a place but seekers looking for authentic religiousness, but unsure if or where it might be found.

Even more so than with boomers now in midlife, Xers invest a great deal of emotion and meaning in the distinction between being religious and being spiritual, opting for the latter as an expression of lived theology and a critique of organized religion. But this portrait of the generation is at odds with the moderate views of many Xers who have not written off all congregations and parishes. There is a churched version of the generation X culture that is definitely milder, more open to the possibility of discerning the mystery of life wherever it may be found—even in stodgy places like congregations and parishes. *Milder* and *more open* do not mean, however, that this culture does not reach far or permeate the boundaries of the congregation or parish. Xers are generally skeptical, suspicious, and at times irreverent, but if we dig beneath this exterior appearance we discover real people who often are eager and anxious, as one young

person in a California congregation told us, to "start working on God." As already mentioned, writer Winifred Gallagher brought out a book about this same time entitled *Working on God,*[18] capturing the notion of religion for neoagnostics as a process of negotiation and formation of faith. She suggests there is a counterpart to the noisy, external appearance of doubt and suspicion: an internal, much quieter quest for something deep and vital. Call it a quest for the sacred; what distinguishes the churched from the unchurched in this instance turns on the willingness to entertain the question, "What if religion could be about something more, essentially about getting real with life?" Those who can say yes to this question are spiritually seeking, hybrid souls as we say, religious on their own terms, even if the word *religion* conjures up negative feelings.

It is a question presupposing that life has no easy answers. It is also recognition, articulated better by some than by others, that if there are answers they are likely to come in the context of sharing within a faith community. The truth is many young Americans do discover an institutional space for working on God and negotiating religious styles within mainline Protestant and Catholic congregations, within Jewish synagogues, even within contemporary evangelicalism. They find authentic religiousness not handed down to them by religious authority, but as something worked on and shaped through personal and shared experience in relation to Scripture and religious teachings, within these settings or in the specialized context that these settings make possible. Beaudoin allows as much when he says "wandering the edges of the institution" may be the way young Americans come to terms with themselves and discover this fuller realization of life.

On some fundamental religious questions, there is a crucial difference by generation, which shows up within the churched population. For example, when asked about the significance attached to a particular denomination or religious tradition, 41 percent of the churched gen Xers and 40 percent of churched boomers say it is important, compared to 54 percent of the churched pre-boomers. For churchgoers, clearly there is a discernible change of outlook toward religious heritage and its role and authority for faith commitment on the part of the post–World War II generations. As popularly understood, faith communities have lost much of their distinctiveness of history and theology. This becomes all the more important

considering that among the unchurched, generational differences on this item are not striking; the unchurched of all ages and generations have a rather uniform, secular outlook. What we have is an instance of vanishing boundaries, finding its fullest expression among the unchurched.

Those views having evolved broadly in society, we also begin to see something of the same pattern in the connection between religion and morality. When asked if "most importantly, religion teaches good moral life," boomers and generation Xers are less likely than pre-boomers within the churched sector to embrace the notion that religion is a source of a good moral life. That religion and morality are connected seems to have been widely accepted in an earlier era and is still reflected in the views of many pre-boomers. However, the younger generations (even within churches today) do not adhere as strongly to an older bourgeois culture that presumed a close connection between the two. This breakup of an older cultural pattern has long been reflected in the expansion of the unchurched sector, but now it finds expression within the congregation with the younger generations. In no way does this suggest that these church members and participants lack strong views on moral issues; indeed, the great majority of them do. Rather, the point is that each and every moral issue must now be dealt with on its own terms. Old-style generalization about religion and morality has given way to specifics in an age of single-issue politics. Consequently, it becomes more difficult to peg people on a liberal-to-conservative continuum of religious ethics than was once the case.

But such changes have also opened up new opportunity for the congregation. A good example is the evolving ways in which churches, synagogues, and temples are now relating to marriage and family styles. Historically, throughout the twentieth century at least, those who were divorced or separated (and single parents in particular) often were less involved in the congregation than those in an intact marriage and family. White, middle-class Protestant congregations especially functioned as a bastion of familism. Church teachings, programs, and ethos all sanctioned the nuclear family; those engaged in a sexual relationship outside of marriage or those from a broken marriage typically felt out of place or were forced to be less than honest about their lifestyle and status.

This heritage persists in many congregations today. But in a growing number, too, new programs for singles (including those who are divorced and single parents) have led to greater involvement. Corresponding to these programmatic initiatives is an environment of greater tolerance in regard to lifestyle, various forms of family arrangement, and changing patterns of sexual intimacy. People who might otherwise be alienated from a congregation are drawn to a religious setting that, as one divorced woman told us, is "nonjudgmental and very accepting." The popularity of evangelical Christian singles' groups for those currently unmarried is a case in point of greater openness and acceptance.

Despite their conservative moral teachings, evangelical and "new paradigm"[19] churches are quite successful in creating a more accepting environment. Popular culture places great emphasis on the interplay between the body and the sensual and upon the mystery of human experience, including sexual experience—themes that are rich spiritually and theologically, and increasingly embraced in a creative way by religious leaders. Redefining moral and religious norms relating to sexuality is highly contentious, but the impetus to do so and to explore further its connection to spirituality is very much a growing grassroots sentiment. As one California pastor said to us about ministering to single-parent families, "We must listen now more than ever to who the people are, not only in the congregation but in the world . . . and I've seen in the last year or two more of a movement that says, 'You know, we've gotta change to make a difference in people's lives,' and yes, that is happening, there's more of an openness to people's real lives."

What all these changes imply is that the boundaries once distinguishing the churched from the unchurched are in a great deal of flux. Although members of the younger generations are as inclined as pre-boomers in our survey to say they want a "sharp distinction between the religious and the secular," they mean something else by the comment. They want lines drawn less in keeping with a Norman Rockwell world where religious experience and practice are clearly demarcated and rigidly institutionalized, preferring instead a world with permeable boundaries where an individual's own experience and journey are privileged as a spiritual trajectory over rigid structures and expectations. Certainly they thrive upon a blurring of

older religious and cultural dichotomies such as sacred-secular, spirit-body, and public-private, in the search for reconfigurations in keeping with a more holistic human vision.

In keeping with our earlier discussion on the importance of familial and communal themes in the congregation, many people today—and not just young adults—are looking for a deeper level of spiritual bonding built upon the sacred potential of human experience, be it intimate or simply a relationship with fellow believers. Fundamentally, the old cultural and theological boundaries separating the human from the divine may themselves be under revision. Beaudoin must be on to something when he observes that what many people, and certainly many gen Xers, are looking for is a lived theology that engages experience at the intersection of the human and the divine, one that takes seriously "exploring the experiences of the incarnation, that is, finding the divine in human form."[20] If so, our very categories of churched and unchurched may need to be recast and shorn of their older, culturally embedded assumptions. Certainly our conceptions of the congregation must be sharpened, a concern we take up in the next chapter.