

Is the prodigal generation gone for good, or will they return to faith?

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Drew Dyck didn't lose the Christian faith of his childhood when he became an adult, but he noticed lots of others did.



Drew Dyck

Dyck, an editor of online publications for *Christianity Today*, talked to some of those who've left the faith for his recent book, [*Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith ... and How to Bring Them Back*](#). Some answers have been edited for length and clarity.

Q: What prompted you to write about ex-Christians?

A: My friends began leaving the faith. The first was a friend from high school. We had grown up in the church; both of our fathers were pastors. A

few years after high school, he informed me that he was no longer a Christian. That got my attention. As I moved through my 20s, I witnessed other friends “de-convert.” I realized that these experiences were not unique.

Q: Are a lot of young people really leaving the faith? Won't they just come back when they're older?

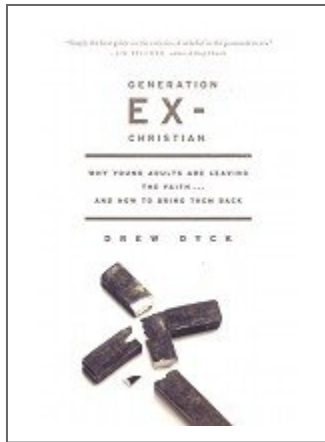
A: The answer to the first question is “yes.” In the 2009 American Religious Identification Survey, 18- to 29-year-olds were found to be the least religious age group: 22 percent claimed “no religion.” That was up 11 percent from 1990.

Whether or not they will return is where the scholarly consensus breaks down. Some view the exodus from the church as a hiatus, a matter of young Americans “slapping the snooze” on Sunday mornings. They see the trend as a reversible life-phase phenomenon. I’m not so sure.

Q: What's the main reason they give for leaving?

A: Most cited intellectual doubts, but there's often more to the story. One young woman had attended a prominent Christian college, where she'd suffered a mental breakdown after feeling ostracized by the community and betrayed by Christian friends. But it was only in subsequent years that she constructed her elaborate system of doubt. Her intellectual doubts may have prevented her from returning to Christianity, but they were almost certainly not the reason she left in the first place.

My challenge was to watch for those underlying experiences that often push people from the faith. It sounds more credible to say you left on intellectual grounds. But more often, the head follows the heart.



Q: What interesting things did you learn during the interviews?

A: I encountered some surprising signs of spiritual life. In the interviews, I asked the ex-Christians whether they ever still prayed. Most still did pray. They were angry, conflicted prayers but beautiful in their honesty and desperation.

Q: You have some interesting categories of unbelievers in your book: Can you ex-plain what these terms mean?

A: No two “leavers” are exactly the same, but some patterns did emerge.

“Postmodern leavers” reject Christianity because of its exclusive truth claims and moral absolutes. For them, Christian faith is just too narrow.

“Recoilers” leave because they were hurt in the church. They suffered some form of abuse at the hands of someone they saw as a spiritual authority. God was guilty by association.

“Modernists” completely reject supernatural claims. God is a delusion. Any truth beyond science is dismissed as superstition.

“Neo-pagans” refers to those who left for earth-based religions such as Wicca. Not all actually cast spells or participate in pagan rituals, but they deny a transcendent God and see earth as the locus of true spirituality.

“Spiritual rebels” flee the faith to indulge in behavior that conflicted with their faith. They also value autonomy and don’t want anyone—especially a superintending deity—telling them what to do.

“Drifters” do not suffer intellectual crises or consciously leave the faith; they simply drift away. Over time, God becomes less and less important until one day, he’s no longer part of their lives.

Q: Has the church played a role in causing this trend? If so, how can it stem the tide?

A: Over the past couple of decades, business thinking has affected the way many churches minister to youth. The goal has become attracting large numbers of kids and keeping them entertained. ... There’s nothing wrong with video games and pizza, but they’re tragic replacements for discipleship and catechism. Many young people have been exposed to a superficial form of Christianity that effectively inoculates them against authentic faith.

Q: What role does contemporary American culture play?

A: A lot of Christians fear the corrupting influence of “the world,” but when it comes to the spiritual plights of young people, what happens inside the church matters most.

Q: You’re a part of the generation you’re writing about. What is different about those such as yourself who didn’t leave?

A: Young people who have meaningful relationships with older Christians are much more likely to retain their faith into adulthood. I had those connections and have no doubt they were instrumental in my life. I also sought out the intellectual resources to understand and defend my faith. ...

The difference between me and my friends whom I now describe as “ex-

Christians” may be a matter of degree, rather than kind. We all have the tendency to stray. But God, in his mercy, keeps drawing me back.