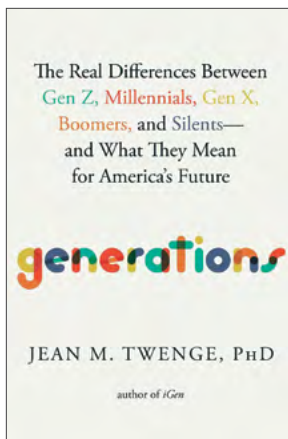


Generations: The Real Differences Between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents—and What They Mean for America’s Future

by Jean M. Twenge

New York: Atria, 2023. 560 pp.

Reviewed by Chaplain (Lieutenant Colonel) Sean A. Levine



In her most recent book, Jean Twenge argues that an analysis of the differences between generations provides a glimpse into the future facilitated by a careful understanding of the recent past and the present. This premise guides her characteristically prescient studies of American culture. Alive, at present, in numbers large enough to impact American culture, from youngest to oldest, are the Polars, Gen Z, the Millennials, Gen X, the Boomers, and the Silents. In Twenge’s research, these represent the generations that interact with one another in homes, schools, marketplaces, places of worship, and professional settings. Each generation represents a unique constellation of experiences and perspectives. Understanding how those perspectives diverge from one another, says Twenge, is crucial for understanding relationships in a variety of settings with an eye towards how politics, economic policy, marketing, and public discourse might affect mental health.¹

Twenge contends that the study of generational differences forms a special way of looking at history. History, she asserts, is more than a series of events along the straight line of time. History is the ebb and flow of culture; shifts in technology, attitudes, beliefs, behavioral norms, diversity, prejudice,

time use, education, family size, marriage/family dynamics, and any other constitutive elements of cultural experience. As things shift, new generations experience these constitutive elements of culture in new ways. The subjective nature of what we are often tempted to consider as objective reality manifests in the unique existential experience of each generation. Generational studies describe and attempt to account for the unique contexts represented by the generations of people living together in the ebb and flow of culture. As Twenge explains, cultural change leads to generational change, and, thus, each generation grows up in an ostensibly unique culture.²

Twenge, implicates three basic causal agents in the cultural changes in America that lead inexorably to generational changes: changes in technology, the proliferation of an isolating individualism, and a slowed developmental maturation. These mechanisms do not operate in a linear fashion. Rather, these three elements interact in a dynamic, circular process. According to Twenge’s “Technology Model of Generation,”³ a theory that she began developing in her previous book, *iGen*, changes in technology foster changes in culture.⁴ The recent technological changes experienced in America have led to both an exponentially

increased isolating individualism and a slowed transition from childhood to adulthood due to a lengthening adolescence.⁵ The modernization and commercialization of survivability have made life, in general, easier and safer, which in turn allows people to grow up more independently and slowly while still surviving. This is a contemporary, post-industrial phenomenon. These cultural changes have caused notable generational differences.

Twenge's Technology Model of generational differences has tremendous explanatory power in that it renders an evidence-based accounting for the rapid proliferation of fragmentation in American culture. Generational gaps manifest now with each wave of new technology, and this is particularly true for technologies that help us to traffic information. Both the manner of delivery and the nature the information delivered shape the end user's reception of information, the information's impact on the recipient, and the ways in which the receiver perceives the world. Rather than neutral entities passively receiving neutral data, people actively receive information that shapes their perceptions of reality. Generational gaps have become less tied to the passage of time and more intertwined with changes in the speed of the delivery of highly personalized, world-perception-shaping information streams.

Twenge provides substantial analyses of each of the generations of Americans she studies: the Silents (born 1925-1945), the Boomers (born 1946-1965), Gen X (born 1965-1979), the Millennials (born 1980-1994), Gen Z (born 1995-2012), and the Polars (2013-2029). Whereas in *iGen* Twenge bases her findings on four datasets with a population sample of 11 million people, *Generations* rests on an analysis including twenty-four datasets

studied across a population sample of 39 million people. Thus, from the perspective of statistical analysis, *Generations* represents a significant increase in the scope of the collected data. This increase in data scope results in a vastly increased specificity that helps us to discern and separate the myths from the realities of generational differences.

With this knowledge, people can understand each other better and live together more harmoniously.⁶ As Twenge asserts, "Demystifying generational differences, as this book attempts, may also reduce intergenerational conflict. The more we understand the perspective of different generations, the easier it is to see we're all in this together."⁷ However, the force of Twenge's presentation seems to lean in the opposite direction: we are not, in fact, all in this together. It seems clear that we are experiencing the world more and more apart from one another. The "this" we are supposedly all in together is different for each generation in the ways that Twenge expertly describes. Further, the "we" that she describes is not "together" in that our existential experiences of the world are more and more irreconcilably disparate. Although Twenge's generational studies tell some powerfully explanatory stories, nothing about those stories suggests any serious motivation toward the togetherness that she hopes to foster. Most especially at odds with this optimism is the exponential growth in the super-efficient technologies that deliver increasingly individualized priorities of experience.

Twenge suggests several key implications. She writes: "All signs point toward religion continuing to retreat among Americans."⁸ Regarding spirituality replacing religion, Twenge notes that Millennials were supposed to be spiritual, but not religious.

However, "that also didn't pan out: 6 in 10 26-40-year-olds in the General Social Survey said they were very or somewhat spiritual in 2018, down from 7 in 10 in 2006. Millennials are not replacing religion with spirituality; they are both less religious and less spiritual."⁹ It is true that one is more likely to hear Millennials or Gen Zers talk about spirituality rather religion, but that fact is overshadowed by the reality that the numbers of people identifying as religious or as spiritual are both declining among Millennials and Gen Z. Twenge places the decline in religion's popularity at the doorstep of the rise in technology-enhanced, egocentric individualism, which stands directly at odds with faithful religious adherence.¹⁰ Twenge does not explain the statistically demonstrated failure of spirituality to replace religion. It may be that our cultural ability to believe in a transcendent reality of any kind is deteriorating because of the rise to prominence of a materialist metaphysics based in the physical sciences and the apparent resulting success of technological advancement.

Twenge also asserts, "The slow-life strategy has grown with each generation, delaying traditional milestones at every stage of the life-cycle."¹¹ She reports as well that "technology has isolated us from each other, sowed political division, fueled income inequality, spread pervasive pessimism, widened generation gaps, stolen our attention, and is the primary culprit for a mental health crisis among teens and young adults."¹² These trends show no signs of slowing in America. Thus, we face a future characterized by a decline in religious adherence and spiritual sensibility, an increasing individualized isolation facilitated by algorithmic calculations, and the encroachment of ever smaller and more complex

personal electronic devices that accelerate the efficiency of artificial information processing. All of this reduces the world to one's individual, idiosyncratic preferences.

If Twenge's projections hold, the Army will be recruiting among a less and less religious constituency that reaches emotional maturity later and later. These underdeveloped individuals will live in a more and more egocentric experience of the world, detached from collective, meaning-making stories. Many, if not most, will replace religion/spirituality with ideological fealty and fervor centered in political commitments or the advance of social justice causes.¹³ The value systems created and/or supported by this sort of milieu will come into increasing conflict with the values that motivate military service if, say, the Army

Values conflict with the individualistic goals of the person or their guiding, egocentric ideology.

New Chaplains will also embody the cultural pull of extended adolescence. They, too, will experience and embody an increasing individualism that threatens to narrow one's experience of the world even as more of the world becomes available through virtual media. Already, the religious pluralism that once held the various and unique traditional religions in a unity of diversity has given way, largely, to a newly crafted spirituality-centered individualism requiring neither history nor tradition for reasonable validation. Instead, an ego-driven inner feeling of connection has replaced membership in a tradition with a time-honored story, and this serves to further fragment our culture.

As cultural cohesion increasingly fragments, the religious communities that stress a time-honored tradition of communal, in-person gathering may become some of the last bastions of cohesive social connectivity. The military may continue to foster greater levels of cohesion and social connection than the wider society, but the military may also succumb to the increasing fragmentation characteristic of the wider culture, and this may manifest either in continued challenges in recruiting, in a culture change in the military that mirrors the civilian culture, or both. There will always be phenomena that bring groups of people together, but just how much of this togetherness can resist the fragmentation and creeping dehumanization so characteristic of the present age of technology remains to be seen.

Chaplain (Lieutenant Colonel) Sean A. Levine serves as a priest in the Orthodox Church in America, and he is currently stationed in San Antonio, TX as the Chaplain Accounts Readiness Manager for the Installation Management Command. Chaplain Levine holds Master of Arts degrees in Theological Studies (2003) and Biblical Studies (2008) from Asbury Theological Seminary, a Master of Divinity degree from St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary (2010), a Master of Science degree in Marriage and Family Therapy from Texas A&M—Central Texas (2017), and a Doctor of Ministry degree from Erskine Theological Seminary (2023). His D.Min. dissertation, "Pastoral Guidance: Theological Anthropology and the Art of Pastoral Care," applies an Eastern Orthodox Christian theological anthropology to pastoral practice. He shares a busy, loving, three-generational home in San Antonio with his wife of 34 years, Jennifer, his youngest son, Andrew (17), and his oldest son, Ethan (25), Ethan's wife, Alexandra, and their one-year-old son, Philip—Chaplain and Mrs. Levine's first grandchild.

NOTES

1 Jean M. Twenge, *Generations: The Real Differences Between Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, Boomers, and Silents—and What They Mean for America's Future* (New York: Atria Books, 2023), 3.

2 Twenge, *Generations*, 4-5.

3 Twenge, *Generations*, 6.

4 Jean M. Twenge, *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant,*

Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood (and What That Means for the Rest of Us) (New York: Atria Books, 2017).

5 Twenge, *Generations*, 6-18.

6 Twenge, *Generations*, 20.

7 Twenge, *Generations*, 515.

8 Twenge, *Generations*, 502-503.

9 Twenge, *Generations*, 299.

10 Twenge, *Generations*, 301.

11 Twenge, *Generations*, 513.

12 Twenge, *Generations*, 515.

13 Twenge, *Generations*, 504.