Youth Spirituality: A Reality in Search of Expression

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Abstract: The disaffection of youth with institutional church in both Australia and the U.K. has been well documented. A number of writers in the field point to a remarkable level of spirituality amongst youth. This paper examines the conflicts apparent between young people and church as a means of expression of their spirituality. Some research findings in Australian High Schools are presented. A research survey was designed to determine the level of recognition among senior students of the types of experiences to which some might give a religious interpretation. The level of experiential spirituality among the groups was remarkably high while church allegiance remained low. Some comparisons between youth culture in Australia and the U.K. are made by reference to reports published in each country.

Key Words: youth spirituality; youth ministry; religious experience; limit experience; church allegiance; detraditionalisation; Australian-British youth culture

The problem with youth spirituality is that young people themselves do not appear to fit the “church” mould. The reference to “church” here and throughout this paper is interpreted as being a range of churches that are broadly Christian in belief. In Australia young adults are a group “under-represented in church life.”1 They stand in stark contrast to older generations. Fifty-eight percent believe that their most important value is to enjoy life while only 27% of an older, retired generation agree with this. On the positive side the survey indicates that 82% of youth have a strong sense of meaning and purpose in life.

However, the meaning and purpose are not expressed in church allegiance. They hold a range of spiritual beliefs. The Christian Research Association report shows that only 15% see religious belief as important in day to day living. A further 21% have an interest in new-age or alternative religious practices. Only 14% claim to attend church frequently. A very low percentage of those who do attend (39%) witness to friendships being formed with other church attendees. This is in contrast to an older generation where 63% of older adults have friends who attend the same church.

There are strong parallels between church affiliation in Australia and the U.K.2 One might suspect that there are similar problems in both countries with young people and their allegiance to formal church. The Y Church Report from the Catholic diocese of Northampton seems to confirm this.3

The report finds that, despite significant disaffection with church, there is a high level of spirituality among young people in the U.K. When this is related to Christian faith it appears to define the young broadly into three different groups. There are those with

high levels of Christian faith and a personal relationship with God. These, however, often find that there is no close friend or member of their family who is there to share their faith and support them.

A further group tend to believe the more comfortable aspects of Christianity but also hold a wide range of common beliefs in such things as horoscopes, luck and destiny. Their faith is somewhat unfocussed and directionless.

The third group has a low level of faith and tends to be scientific in their approach, dismissing things that cannot be proven. These three groups parallel those identified in research work among Australian Catholic school students.

**THE SPIRITUAL REVOLUTION**

Disaffection towards religion is not an unusual phenomenon in western societies. It is at least as true in much of the adult population as it is among youth. Bentley and Hughes⁴ believe that while Australians in general feel positively towards the churches, they do not see them as important or relevant. Less than 25% of Australians now claim to attend church at all and only 13% would actually attend in any given week.

On the other hand, the research described in this paper and numerous writers such as O’Murchu,⁵ Tacey⁶ and Rolheiser⁷ identify a growing interest in spirituality that is especially strong amongst youth. Each, because of their background, brings a unique perspective to the discussion. O’Murchu, a Catholic priest and sociologist, works among the poor of Dublin. Tacey, an Associate Professor of English with Latrobe University, also offers courses in spirituality to first year students, and has a crowd flowing out the doors. Rolheiser is a Canadian Catholic priest who writes regularly for the Western Catholic Reporter. His approach to church is more traditional than that of either O’Murchu or Tacey.

For O’Murchu this rekindled interest in spirituality stems from a natural human tendency to seek out the ultimate meaning and purpose of life in a complex universe. Tacey also believes that all people, and particularly youth, have an innate spiritual hunger. According to Tacey, western society has experienced almost two centuries of social change where alternatives to religion have been presented as ultimate answers to life. Each one has proved a failure. Such things as totalitarian communism or, at the other extreme national socialism, the “death of God” and what Taylor⁸ refers to as an “expressive individualism” have all been found wanting. For Tacey, the old answers are no longer serving us well, the more recent ones have failed and there is a serious search to find new ones that are in harmony with our experience of the sacred.

Rolheiser too believes that everyone develops a personal spirituality. He defines this as a sense of who we are, our history and our future. From the Rolheiser definition, it becomes clear that spirituality is part of a common human experience. This is similar to the Hardy⁹ hypothesis that the reason religion has survived in some form throughout the

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evolutionary process is its particular usefulness for personal survival. In fact, Hardy says, this capacity for religion, perhaps better termed the capacity to create a personal spirituality, is in fact hard-wired into the human brain.

More recent work in brain science\(^\text{10}\) tends to confirm the Hardy hypothesis. The research shows the brain's inbuilt capacity to respond to the type of experiences that some might interpret as "religious." The researchers locate the specific areas of the brain that are affected by the experiences during their occurrence.

Hay and Hunt\(^\text{11}\) found a very high level of reporting and recognition of these "religious" or "spiritual" experiences among the general population in Britain. They conclude that "the figures ... might suggest that we are in the midst of an explosive spiritual upsurge not unlike the Methodist revival of the 18th century."

When Hay\(^\text{12}\) began to explore religious experience in Britain, he made an extrapolation from his research that gave a figure of possibly 15 million Britains at that time who could say that at least once or twice in their lives they may have "been aware of or influenced by a presence or power" which is different from their everyday selves. His later work with Hunt has an even stronger response rate, witness to the spiritual search going on in our society. In line with the research in Australian Catholic schools presented here, 76% now confirm their recognition of this type of experience. There has been a 59% rise in the response rate since the earlier work in the mid-eighties. On the other hand, they also found that people had only the "vaguest remnants" of religious language with which to express the experience.

Thus, while the mainstream Christian churches in both countries are losing adherents, the spiritual hunger of the people remains a reality. This paper suggests there are a number of difficulties that must be overcome before young people in particular will find an expression for their spirituality in the traditional Christian churches.

The Reality of Experience

Shea\(^\text{13}\) and Tracy\(^\text{14}\) both believe that religious language is characteristic of a common human experience of discovering the sacred or discovering the mystery of life itself. In reflecting on his work with young people Tacey outlines two levels of spiritual development. The first he defines as "spiritual experience." Shea's description of this reflects on the sentence "I see a bird." It is when we relate not just to our sight of the bird but begin to reflect on the mystery that is life for both the bird and ourselves that we begin to recognise this spiritual experience. We can then progress to Tacey's second stage. He terms this "spiritual awakening." We begin to have a growing intuition that there is a deeper mystery to life and that we are part of a larger picture.

Rather than refer to the 'religious' or the 'spiritual' the research among Australian students described in this paper uses the concept of "Limit Experience." Limit experiences are the types of experiences which have the capacity to raise awareness in human beings of the age-old questions that confront humanity. Taylor sees these questions: the meaning


of existence, human destiny and the meaning of suffering as being “uncommonly deep, powerful and universal.”

Human beings can confront these issues via a range of experiences. Some people can notice a pattern to events in life. At other times there can be awareness of a presence that is interpreted as being beyond the norm: a presence of the dead, God or something other than God. It could be, as in Einstein’s15 “cosmic religious feeling” a realisation of humanity’s unique presence in the cosmos.

It is very difficult to elucidate this (cosmic religious) feeling to anyone who is entirely without it … The religious geniuses of all ages have been distinguished by this kind of religious feeling, which knows no dogma … In my view, it is the most important function of art and science to awaken this feeling and keep it alive in those who are receptive to it.

Many terms have been used to name such experiences: mystical, transcendent and peak, among others. To avoid the possible confounding variable of a negative response among young people to any religious connotation this research used the term “Limit Experience” throughout. For the purposes of this research a Limit Experience was defined as:

An experience that reveals a reality of life beyond the self; beyond the here and now. It may be recognition of our own fragility and vulnerability as much as a joyous awareness of a reality beyond our normal encounter with life.

Youth Spirituality and Experience

The reality of these experiences among young people is a major conclusion of this research among senior Australian high school students presented here. Working with a slightly older group Tacey has identified similar phenomena. Youth are particularly experiential in their spirituality. So much so that Tacey makes a plea for experience to be added to the triangle of history, scripture and tradition and recognised as contributing to a living religious faith. For Tacey a living God is dynamic and experiential. Thus our religious faith will change as we experience a dynamic spirituality. In some ways, Tacey says, one could be suspicious that church, and theologians in particular, would be comfortable with the idea that “God is dead.” This would allow them to pick over the bones endlessly without feeling that there is any change to their base perceptions and directions. Unfortunately, he states, a living God and a dynamic world are simply not like that.

The tension created in raising the status of experience alongside scripture and tradition has been with theology over centuries. In the recent past the emphasis in much of Christian theology has been on a God who is all-powerful and transcendent. Tacey believes youth today see a God who is far more part of our world and imminent, present among us in our world and its people and in the wonder of the cosmos. He holds that youth, and one could say many adults, no longer attend religious ritual unless it has an experiential meaning for them. It must express their experience and it must express their spiritual search or they will simply vote with their feet.

Many of the concepts of the traditional, transcendent theology are unintelligible to youth, according to Tacey. Much of Christian spirituality has been based on a retreat from the world and a need to disregard the self in personal sacrifice in order to be close to God. Many youth find this incomprehensible. The concept that Jesus gave his life for the salvation of a sinful world is seen as negative. The world and its creation and our place in the cosmos are both such a wonderful mystery and such a wonderful gift, that it is difficult

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for young people to understand how anyone can present the world in such a negative way that it is something to be shut out or overcome.

CONVERSATIONS OF CONFLICT

Institutional church, as a way to express the reality of spiritual search and experience, appears to be a problem for many. Rolheiser refers to these problems as modern divorces. First there is the divorce of spirituality from the whole experience of church (ecclesiology). Next there is conflict between the approach of the religions towards sexual morality and young peoples’ experience of sexuality and relationships. Tacey also identifies this conflict as do Freitas and King.

Finally, there is the divorce between the experience of the spiritual and the language with which it is expressed. Radcliffe is among those who confirm this perception. These modern divorces create conversations of conflict between institutional religion and young people in particular. I will briefly examine each in turn before focusing on the research outcomes in Australian schools.

Spirituality and Ecclesiology

This first conflict stretches beyond young people to a wider society. O’Murchu believes that people in the western world have no problem with belief in the Divine. Their problems begin with the way in which formal religions present that belief. Tacey sees “old-style” religion as “plagued by doubts about God’s existence, because it realises that its own conceptions are difficult to believe.” Spirituality, on the other hand, “does not ask for proofs, because the proof is the experience itself.” Young people, as this research paper indicates, are strongly experiential.

Hay and Hunt found that, among those who don’t go to church, there was a perception that church did not supply anything that they needed at the moment. Church was somewhere where one went when one was in trouble or had a particular need to fulfil. There was also a strong opinion that church failed to practice Christianity in the way that it was presented by Jesus in the gospels. Finally there was the whole question of religious language as not having any significant meaning for them today. The following quote from one of Tacey’s students sums it up:

The most destructive force against Christianity has been Christians and the complacency of the church. Churchianity has virtually destroyed a good religion.

Religion and Sexuality

Rolheiser takes a traditionalist approach to this conversation but defines it very well. He believes that there are non-negotiables with regard to sexuality. The first of these is that sex is linked to marriage. If this is not so, then Rolheiser sees the sex act as somehow flawed. In his description it is “schizophrenic” in nature because it does not express the reality of a loving relationship. On the positive side there is capacity through our sexuality

16 D. Freitas and J. King, Save the Date (New York: Crossroad, 2003).
18 Tacey, The Spirituality Revolution, 164.
19 Ibid, 88.
to grow spiritually within a dynamic relationship and achieve sanctity while observing Christian morality.

Freitas and King writing from the U.S., believe this more traditional view does not ring true to young people. They believe that the message they have heard since High School has simply been negative. It is an argument that somehow heterosexual relationships outside of marriage lead to sex which itself leads on to unwanted children or worse, abortion. This negative message is presented as a slippery slope down which we should not begin to tread. This negative approach is not accepted by Freitas and King. The message of “save yourself for marriage” is not one that speaks to a generation where people are marrying later and later in life. They are not deferring the relationships that are a natural part of life and would, in earlier times, have led to marriage at a younger age. Study, the need to establish career, and, for many, the fragility of employment are all leading to a different society in which people are marrying later, if at all.

In Australia, for instance, marriage is in decline. The 2001 figure for marriages in Australia was the lowest since 1978.20 There is a trend towards a higher median age for first marriages. In 2001 it was 29 years for men, an increase from 24 years in 1981. For women the median age for first marriage is 27 years, an increase from 22 years since 1981. The reality of this situation, recognised by Freitas and King, is that young people will not defer close relationships, including sexual ones, for a span of years which is far beyond that asked of their parents and indeed perhaps their older brothers and sisters. They write a practical guide to relationships that presents, in an upfront and non-threatening way, the issues and the decision-making involved without being judgmental. For them, it is this type of approach that church needs to take if it is to win back the allegiance of youth on these issues. The final comment of one of Tacey’s students that “sexuality was an obstacle to my faith” is telling in its simplicity and its reality.

Tacey believes that young people are looking for an integration of sexuality with the whole of life. They see sexual expression, as do Freitas and King, as an issue that varies with the level of commitment between couples.

Tacey21 believes that

religion has placed itself in an invidious position by representing God as an antagonist to the bodily vitalities ... by placing the burden of sin upon sexuality and the body it has weakened its own credibility.

Language

Radcliffe says that many homilies fail to touch their congregations. They use a theological language that has little relevance to people sitting in the pews and to their ordinary lives. In saying this he is not necessarily rejecting the theology. He is simply making a plea that the language in which the theology is presented be changed. It needs to be translated in a way that can be understood in today’s world. In Radcliffe’s opinion this challenge has appeared before in the history of the church. In past times it saw the birth of the Dominicans and then the Jesuits. He makes no suggestion as to what will be the outcome this time around. But he is clear that the language in which we express our religion, which may have expressed spirituality for previous generations, no longer speaks to many.

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Hay and Hunt endorse this lack of a "widely plausible common public language" for spirituality. For an earlier generation spiritual expression was enabled through the church. In our society Hay believes there is suspicion of institutional church and a lack of plausibility for the institution. There is also a learned embarrassment with anything religious. According to Tacey the expression of spirituality in a post modern world is complex. The languages that will be required to express it must borrow from numerous quarters. The languages of mysticism, philosophy, anthropology and even psychology must be examined and included in a new language of theology.

GROWING IN FAITH: THE EDUCATION CHALLENGE

I will now refer to research outcomes with some specific groups of young people in Australian schools who are part of these “conversations of conflict.” Their schools, while differing in approach, take their formal religious education seriously. The survey instrument used in this research was administered in March and April in the year 2000 for some Queensland Catholic schools (CS) and in March 2003 for an all-boys independent school, in British terms a public school (PS), in New South Wales. The age groups of the students were similar despite the survey being conducted in different educational jurisdictions. On average New South Wales students are six months older than their Queensland counter-parts. The survey was administered among the CS group to Year 12 students and for the PS group to Year 11 students. What appears to be a one-year gap is approximately only six months on average.

The socio-economic circumstance of the CS group chosen were very similar and were average to below-average as measured by the Commonwealth Department of Education Training & Youth Affairs. This model was developed by the Commonwealth to provide a socio economic measure based on data supplied from the schools themselves and the national census of population and housing. The scores nationally are organised around a Mean of 100. For the CS group the socio economic scores of their schools ranged from 103.3 down to 89.9, indicating that the CS sample was drawn from a population with average and often below-average socio economic background.

In contrast the PS group had a socio economic score of 118. This is well above the national average of 100 and the average for the state of New South Wales of 105. According to Hay higher socio economic status would tend to produce a higher recognition and reporting of Limit Experiences. This was the case among the two groups, but only marginally so.

Experience questions in the survey were based on the Hay reporting framework developed through his extensive work on Religious Experience. They were designed so that there was at least one question from each of the eight Hay framework items. There were both direct questions, for instance “There are times when life has no meaning.” Direct questions were answered using a five point scale from “Certainly false” to “Certainly true.” There were also longer passages based on personal accounts of Limit Experience

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24 Hay, Exploring Inner Space.

25 Ibid.
from the collection of the Religious Experience Research Centre.26 After the passages students were asked “Have you ever had a similar experience yourself?” This was scored on a four point scale ranging from “Never – not at all” through to “Definitely – yes, I had a similar experience.”

Only one question was changed between the two surveys. A statement reading “At times I have felt that there is no purpose or reason for living” had been included in the CS survey and was removed for the PS group. Substituted was a question that read: “At times I have experienced help through prayer.” This small change was justified by the fact that there were other items on depression and meaning in life already included among the Experience items. There had also been no direct question on prayer in the original CS survey. This had only been assessed by use of the written passage option.

The survey return response rate was very high. Over 90% of the PS students responded. The CS response rate was 71%. Given that permission notes from parents had to be sought and signed prior to any use of data these response rates were regarded as very good.

**Comparisons and Contrasts**

Response rates to the Experience questions were so positive that the unusual step was taken of tightening the criteria for responses so that only responses at the highest possible level were regarded as positive. That is, a response of “Certainly true” for direct questions and “Definitely – yes, I had a similar experience” for the descriptive passages, were the only responses accepted as positive in the final analysis. For the PS group 88% of the students answered positively to one or more of the twelve items directly related to the eight Hay categories. The CS group had a 76% response rate for these questions. The results are given below as Table 1. The Hay27 response rate among British adults is included for comparison.

**Response Rates Using Hay’s Categories of Religious Experience**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Experience</th>
<th>Hay Response Rate</th>
<th>Catholic Response Rate</th>
<th>PS Response Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Patterning of events</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of the presence of God</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of receiving help in prayer</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of a guiding presence not called God</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of the presence of the dead</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of a sacred presence in nature</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of an evil presence</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience that all things are “one”</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Positive Response</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 1

The results given above, 76% for CS and 88% for PS, are for the recognition that one or more of the Experience questions was confirmed as similar to a student's own experience. Although the original Hay response is lower, as indicated previously a later survey by Hay and Hunt also reported a 76% response rate. There is evidence in these results of a spirituality searching for expression.

Students were also asked which of their subjects made them “feel most deeply about life.” In both CS and PS groups religious education was the only subject that had a statistically significant relationship to the recognition and reporting of Limit Experience. Results are given in Table 2 below.

Reports of Limit Experience by Extent of Perceived Influence of Religious Education as a Subject

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influential subject: Religious Education</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very little</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS Limit No</td>
<td>25.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience Yes</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response Total</td>
<td>22.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slightly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS Limit No</td>
<td>68.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience Yes</td>
<td>24.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response Total</td>
<td>32.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very much</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PS Limit No</td>
<td>28.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience Yes</td>
<td>51.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response Total</td>
<td>47.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

The table above shows that, of those responding positively to one or more of the questions on Limit Experience, a solid percentage (27.1% CS, 23.1% PS) believe that their religious education classes had been very influential in deepening their feelings about life. A further 51% (approximately) in each case believe that it had a slight influence. In each case those who did not relate to any of the Limit Experience questions had only a low percentage (2% CS, 4% PS) who believe that religious education had very much influence in deepening their feelings about life. There appeared to be a much stronger opposition to religious education among the PS group. Of the respondents, 68% of those who reported no Limit Experience also believed that their religious education had very little influence in deepening their feelings about life. This was lower for the CS group at 25.5%.

Despite the positive influence of religious education in both groups, the level of allegiance to institutional church was low. Both groups of young people are remarkably similar in their attitude to formal religion.

Comparison of Responses on Selected Values and Attitudes Questions: % Responding True or Probably True

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>CS School</th>
<th>PS School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I believe in God</td>
<td>63.9</td>
<td>58.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You don’t need to be actively involved in a religion to live a good and meaningful life</td>
<td>74.7</td>
<td>78.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It does not matter so much what you believe so long as you lead a morally good life</td>
<td>68.1</td>
<td>74.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
You can be religious without belonging to any religious organisation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>CS</th>
<th>PS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religion today has nothing to say about the most important issues in life</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>73.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>20.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3

Although there was a significant difference between the two groups on level of church attendance (13.1% of the CS group and 5.3% of the PS group attending every week at least) the responses to the Values and Attitudes questions are very similar. The majority of the respondents believe in God, although there is hardly consensus on this point. The vast majority see that religion and faith are very personal and that you do not need to be actively involved, nor does it matter what you believe in order to lead a good life. This attitude is reflected in their approach to belonging to a particular church. The majority believe that they can express their spirituality without belonging to a religious organisation.

It does seem however that the public face of church is still given due respect. It seems that the vast majority do not believe that religion has nothing to say about important issues in life. It may, however, have difficulty in being able to say it in a coherent manner.

Radcliffe states that much of the teaching of the church is incomprehensible to many because it does not reflect their real experience of life.

Ways Forward

It is very easy to give an outline of the spirituality of the post modern world, including youth spirituality, and be critical of institutional church. Many in the field certainly write in this manner. For both O’Murchu and Tacey there is a need to deconstruct our current religious institutions, and the sooner the better.

For others such as Rolheiser the way forward is to better understand the reality of the Incarnation. He believes that Jesus lives, today, in our world. Rolheiser believes that to understand this will assist us to come to terms with the reality and difficulties of daily living. Any society or institution faces challenges and imperfections. Church is no different. Realising that Jesus is with us in this struggle is a way forward.

Rolheiser has an interesting theological discussion on the institution of Eucharist. When Jesus in the Greek refers to eating his body and blood, the word used, according to Rolheiser, is SARX. This is not a Greek word for a glorified body. In fact it is the Greek for the less attractive parts of the body, the guts, bowels if you like. And Rolheiser compares this to church where the reality of any human institution is that it will be decidedly imperfect no matter what we do. We are challenged to engage in this imperfect

28 Radcliffe, “Preaching to the Perplexed.”
community. The question this researcher has is whether the church will actually be able to theologise itself as an imperfect community. At times, for instance in the pope's apologies for previous crimes of the church, it appears to be trying to publicly admit its sins and imperfections. Perhaps the crisis of child sexual abuse in Christian churches has helped to bring us to this reality. The real question for society at the present time is whether such an admission of imperfection and guilt for past acts would be believed. If one admits imperfection but appears to act as though this is not the case then there is a crisis of perception and belief. This needs to overcome prior to young people embracing the institution of church.

O’Murchu agrees with Rolheiser that Jesus lives in this world and hence our challenge is to reach out and embrace him in all the many forms that he may take, in particular the people around us. However, he extends the idea of incarnation into the times before Christ right back to the beginning of evolution. For O’Murchu, God is present with this world from the very beginning. That is the reality of incarnation. God did not begin to be present on earth only as a visitor born 2000 years ago. God has been with us from the beginning of time. O’Murchu, however, expresses a desire to deconstruct the institution, keeping very little of its current reality.

Tacey agrees. For him, at a time when many in the west, and young people in particular, appear to have a real spiritual hunger, the church appears unable to respond. Perhaps it is because church has for so long been used to being under attack and to defending itself. Perhaps it is because there is an ossification of theological language. If current language does not speak to people today, to develop a new one is difficult in a climate where the institution is still in a defensive mode. Those who try to take the conversation to new frontiers may do so at their own risk!

For Tacey the task is to completely deconstruct and change existing religion so that it is somehow relevant to lived experiences of people. Spiritual experience is the essence. “Once one has an experience of the sacred, questions of “belief” … become secondary.” He believes spiritual experience is the basis of all religions.

Faith, for Tacey, is a leap into the unknown. We need to realise that the images that we have of God, be they created by theology or not, will fall short of the reality. Thus searching for new images of God provides churches with the opportunity to mourn the passing of a theology that has now passed it use by date. In fact Tacey finds it distasteful that churches attempt to present a positive vision of their future while all around them is crumbling. For Tacey there is a need to get on with the job of mourning what is past, burying it and reinventing the future.

What might a new theology look like? The word “God” itself, according to Tacey, may need to be redefined. One student in the research presented here had obviously puzzled over the apparently simple survey question “Do you believe in God?” (Not so simple in reality perhaps!) The dogmatic theologians, those whom Tacey would accuse of rejoicing in the “death of God” so they can get on with endless interpretations of the remains, could argue endlessly about what definition of “God” this question intends. The reality for the student in question was not theological argument but a personal conviction. The marks on the paper seemed to say that the student had been inclined not to answer the question. However, he or she eventually did so with a hand-written comment to say “This is a life-force.” So God may be redefined as a process, a force, or an intimate intense presence and experience. Whatever this is, it takes us to a reality of life where we experience the mystery beyond ourselves without necessarily having any answers.

29 Hay, Exploring Inner Space, 164.
This is a radical view. It is a far more radical one than that of O’Murchu who also wishes to deconstruct much of the institution of church. However, O’Murchu’s hope is that the cosmos and our understanding of it will begin to engage theology. Perhaps this has already happened in some way since Copernican times. We now know so much more about our place in this huge universe. We can ponder on the mystery of it, we can ponder on our smallness within it, and the reality of our existence. For O’Murchu new theology begins when the very existence of our earth and spirituality is traced back over 4 million years. There must be recognition that in some way the incarnation of God, expressed in Jesus, has been here from the beginning of time.

Who then is Jesus? By having Jesus as central to his redefinition of theology O’Murchu appears to be closer to Rolheiser30 than one might think. For O’Murchu Jesus is the final stage of the biological evolution of the human being. It is now time for spiritual evolution to begin. The meaning of the risen Jesus is found in the spirit sent to renew and grow our spirituality. Jesus celebrates in some way the pinnacle of biological evolution. He sends the spirit to begin the era of spiritual evolution.

Calvary, for O’Murchu, is not to be defined as a sacrifice necessary for the redemption of mankind. It is not an offering that had to be made to somehow bring us to God. This would be regarded by O’Murchu as a denigration of tens of thousands of years of human spirituality before Jesus’ birth. He sees that a language of sacrifice for sin as the meaning of Calvary no longer speaks to modern society and certainly does not speak to youth in an intelligible way. Jesus should be regarded as a symbol of the way in which humankind can break a chain of violence and injustice that stretches back over time. This interpretation of Jesus speaks boldly of social justice. From the findings of this research31 the call for social justice would probably be the loudest voice among youth today. They affirm both social justice and the reality of a mystical spiritual search as part of their world vision.

SUMMARY

This paper has attempted to present a summary of some of the views on youth spirituality that are currently abroad and some of the researcher’s own findings on youth spirituality. It presents both the challenges and the realities of an interface between youth and church that will continue to be a difficult one.

The major conversations of conflict taking place centre first on church as an institution, ecclesiology. This first conflict will not be resolved, however, until the other conversations have developed towards consensus, namely that on sexual morality and most importantly that on language. It is incongruous that the real spirituality evident among youth, so clear from this research, has no coherent language for expression.

The one thing that does appear to be clear is that there is a need to rethink and represent much of our formal theology in a way that can once again direct and touch people’s lives and provide them with an expression for the reality of their spiritual experience.

31 P. McQuillan, Encounters Beyond the Pond: The Limit Experience of Senior High School Students, occasional paper 34, 2nd Series (Lampeter: Religious Experience Research Centre, 2002).
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