THE VOCATION OF YOUTH

INSIGHTS
The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary

SPRING 2008

WHITE • VAUGHN • MERRITT • NISHIOKA • HAWKINS
JOHNSTON-KRASE • HOGAN • JENSEN • STUBBS • DEARMAN
This issue honors the memory of our colleague Stanley Robertson Hall (1949-2008).

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Christianity and Culture
Gestures

J. Andrew Dearman
There has been one refrain in the church which, if I’ve heard it once, I’ve heard it a thousand times. More often than not it has been in a committee meeting (Property, Christian Education, Worship, Finance, you name it), in which, when a necessary but particularly unpleasant assignment has been identified, someone has eventually said, “Why don’t we ask the youth to do it?” Paint a dreary church school room, pick up trash along the side entrance to the church, gather bulletins and other detritus after worship, rake the leaves in the playground, lock the doors after Sunday evening meetings, mow the lawn on weekends, or fill in the blank with your favorite necessary but unpleasant chore: “Why don’t we ask the youth to do it?”

It’s not that a church should not expect its youth to engage in acts of service. It’s instead that the church—in handing off to some unsuspecting youth group a truly uncreative and uninspiring task—has admitted, over and over again, that it has hardly a clue as to how genuinely to engage the young people in its midst. Any young person snookered once into performing some such task is not likely to be so snookered twice. Sometimes I wonder if this very practice of niche-marketing young people during their formational years is what has led so many of them to leave our churches in search of new-paradigm congregations that offer everything except multi-generational diversity. Speaking for myself, I have been enriched instead by those faith communities that have had the imagination to be genuinely intergenerational and, in so doing, to understand how gifted they are by the young people in their midst.

If you have winced at least once while reading this, you will enjoy this issue of Insights. David White’s lead article will probably surprise you with how recent that thing we call “adolescence” really is, and will encourage you to think of the young people in your church as treasures more than inconveniences. Amy Scott Vaughn, of the Princeton Seminary Institute for Youth Ministry, has written an article that will provoke strategies for doing more than merely entertaining the youth of your congregation. Carol Howard Merritt, one of our alumnae who has written an amazing book describing “the missing generation,” is advocating a second look at the role that technology can play in relating responsibly with young people. Rodger Nishioka of Columbia Seminary challenges us to see our youth not just as the “future church” but also as the “present church”; and Faith Hawkins, former director of the Youth Theological Initiative at Emory University, offers a thoughtful critique of how contemporary models of youth ministry are often more damaging than formative. Two creative university pastors here in Austin—Ben Johnston-Krase and Roslyn Hogan—engage in a panel conversation about what’s at stake, from their perspective, with respect to the church and its young people. Moreover, two new books are reviewed by David Jensen and Monya Stubbs; and Andy Dearman wraps up this issue with a must-read column on “Gestures.”

I hope this issue of Insights inspires you to get serious about engaging “tomorrow’s church” today!

Theodore J. Wardlaw
President, Austin Seminary
sometimes ask church leaders “How would you characterize today’s teenagers?” Their responses are telling. A few report that youth represent a “spark” that ignites various ministries of their church or that bear important “gifts” for the church’s renewal. Some describe youth as unmotivated “ slackers” that cling to a “sense of entitlement.” Still others characterize youth as “a tribe apart”—a way of describing teen culture as alien to adults. Ultimately, most view youth as “adults in the making,” awaiting some future significance. Additionally, beyond the church, the entertainment media portrays youth as “sexual objects,” or “exploitable market niches” or “dangerous criminals.” Adolescence, it seems, is disputed territory, and it is difficult to discern what, if anything, is essentially true about youth. Yet, how congregations imagine youth and their capacities impacts their relationships with

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youth. For example, if adults imagine youth as incapable, irresponsible, or dangerous, then there is a certain logic to building a youth wing far from the center of church life. But if we imagine youth as bearing gifts for the life of the congregation, it will make sense to find ways to involve youth at the center of the church's life. Hence, adolescence is an appropriate subject for theological reflection. In fact, at a time when the very lives, images, and energies of youth are exploited as commodities, such reflection may be crucial.

Westerners in general seem to suffer from a certain pragmatic bent that compels us to emphasize ends and conclusions (like adulthood), but obscures the goodness of things immanent and immediate (like childhood and adolescence). Yet, Christian theology has always contained a critique of such abstractions in the doctrine of the incarnation, which holds that God indwells and enjoys the very concreteness and diversity of human life. Jürgen Moltmann suggests that the very diversity of life is presented as a gift of the Spirit. He says

Call and endowment, *klesis* and *charisma*, belong together, and are interchangeable terms. This means that every Christian is a charismatic, even if many people never live out their gifts. The gifts which the one or the other person brings or receives are at the service of their calling; for God who calls, takes people at the point where he reaches them and as they are. He accepts people quite specifically, as man or woman, Jew or Gentile, poor or rich, and so on, and puts their whole life at the service of his coming kingdom, which renews the world … What is given to all believers in common and equally, is the gift of the Holy Spirit: ‘The charisma of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord’ (Rom. 6:23). What is given to each person individually and uniquely is different and full of diversity: to each his or her own! … Whatever can be put at the service of Christ’s liberating lordship is a *charismata*, a gift that then becomes a charge. Every Christian is a charismatic in his or her own particular way. The whole of life, and every life in faith is charismatic, for the Spirit is ‘poured out upon all flesh’ to quicken it. Individual powers and energies become charismatic in the relationships which give form to the shared life-process.¹

If we take seriously Moltmann’s conception of spiritual giftedness then we must inquire as to the possibility that young people bear some distinctive gift for the church and God’s mission of healing the world. In this essay, I will attempt to speak generally about the gifts of youth as a means of informing the church’s practices with youth. I will argue that young people are not only subject to the call of God in some distant and ideal future, but are participants even now in the purposes of Jesus Christ as means of grace. In order to grasp the dimensions of this *charism* and call of youth, it will be helpful to have a sense of the historical development of adolescence and some attendant theories. Often historians and developmental theorists have glimpsed the gifts of youth more clearly than theologians. Finally, I will articulate some dimensions of the significance of young people, and claim that by paying attention to youth we are better able to configure some basic claims of the Christian faith.
The social construction of adolescence

First, it is important to note that adolescence as a prolonged period of preparatory limbo is a relatively new phenomenon—about 150 years old. Prior to about the middle of the nineteenth century, youth and adults worked side by side for the benefit of families and their communities. Some young children were bound out as servants, but were, by age fifteen or sixteen, often apprenticed to learn the intricacies of a craft. Work helped sustain the family, the larger community and, many believed, God’s plan. Youth had the satisfaction of doing real work and making a difference—experiences that modern teenagers often miss. Young workers who tilled the soil with their families developed deep understandings of and connections to the earth, the seasons, the sun and moon, and the growing cycles. They gained an appreciation for human strengths and their signature gifts, as well as an appreciation for how their lives were connected to the lives of others: bakers, butchers, cooks, merchants, and families that consumed the produce.

Accordingly, young people were intertwined with the religious, political, and emotional concerns of adult roles. Public political gatherings attracted children and youth. While youth often took up causes alongside adults, they also were politically aware enough to understand and respond to civic injustices—often turning holidays and festivals, such as May Day, into occasions for social protest and political street drama. Feasting, singing, and dancing commonly evolved into social activism—for example, marching en masse to the home of a man who had been beating his wife, hanging him in effigy, singing bawdy songs, and stigmatizing him by placing a big X on his front door. These strong public roles revealed young peoples’ natural desire to understand and act in their world. Historical accounts of youth are full of stories such as these and may provide clues to the particular charisms of youth.

By the end of the eighteenth century, an industrial capitalist economy was fast replacing agricultural and domestic industries. Many youth migrated to cities seeking factory jobs, prompting the death of many of the older customs that had sustained rural communities for centuries—such as concern for the common good, connection to the earth, and the joy of craft. Unlike in earlier craft/agricultural vocations, industrial workers had no choice concerning what they made or how it was made. Thus, work was no longer a creative activity in which individual personality might be expressed. Further, the context of the factory obscured the place of one’s work in sustaining the life of a community.

Over time, machines were built to do the low-skilled tasks assigned to youth in factories. By the late nineteenth century, significant numbers of youth were displaced—a reality which motivated the common school and high school movements in the U.S. and prescribed the contours of modern adolescence. Significantly, into this context the Christian Endeavor Movement, the first modern ministry dedicated especially to youth (and separated out from adult community), was born in 1881 under the leadership of Frances Clark. Mainline Protestant denominations quickly followed suit and organized denominational and congregational youth ministry programs.

Yet, while displaced urban youth were channeled into schools and youth groups,
eighty percent of American youth remained at work on rural farms until the 1930s. In 1930 only about twenty percent of all young people attended high school, but by 1940 that figure had risen to nearly ninety percent. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, one million high school age boys and 750,000 girls were left looking for work. Many took to the road, in part to keep from being a drain on their families struggling to make ends meet. In response, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt launched the National Youth Administration (NYA) to provide training camps for out-of-school youth who needed to develop marketable skills and a pleasant personality in order to compete for jobs. The NYA fully intended to “transmit the values and habits of middle-class families to those who had never experienced them” with the ultimate goal of channeling the hordes of young people displaced by the Great Depression into high schools.

Without a doubt, the economic depression of the 1930s put a practical spin on the process of growing up. According to Grace Palladino, “The crucial thing for the working class youngster was to find a job, any job . . . for a middle-class child, it was to get that high school diploma that could lead to a white-collar job.” For boys, high school was promoted by advice and character-building literature as a time to “buckle down” and get serious about building a career, preferably a professional career that could only be attained by education. Boys and girls were warned away from sexual activity and other frivolities as distractions from a secure future. Boys were expected to shape themselves as commodities for the job market, while girls were to shape themselves as commodities for the marriage market, including winsome social skills, makeup and grooming, home decorating, and the art of polite casual conversation.

Meanwhile, fashions in music, clothing, movies, and food ultimately became hallmarks of this new youth subculture. Parents initially resented the commercial exploitation of their children, yet ultimately capitulated to the marketers who argued that a commercial peer culture would soften the impact of newly enforced high school attendance standards. As the lives of youth were increasingly distracted from the authority of families, communities, and congregations, a prominent youth subculture was substituted—one likely as not originating in Hollywood and increasingly incomprehensible to parents and local communities.

Youth subculture exploded during the late twentieth century, exploiting youth as a massive profit-generating arena for corporations. It has today grown into an overheated youth media culture, replacing family, community, and church as sources of identity. In this postmodern culture, adolescence is marked by its symbiotic relationship with the entertainment industry. The average teen today is confronted with approximately 3000 advertisements daily, making identity much more fluid and illusive, and navigating between good and ill vastly more challenging.

In the twenty-first century, adolescence begins with an earlier puberty and extends longer than ever before. This prolongation leaves youth in situations in which they have less than full power for longer than any other age cohort in history. Adolescent work can be characterized as low-skilled, service-sector work with little or no adult interaction or respect by the community. As hordes of teenagers migrate from one service sector job to another, work fails to provide important resources for establishing identity in
community. Further, many jobs that parents and grandparents held with only a high school diploma now require college or graduate degrees. Ironically, young people report that many corporate jobs secured after college could be easily managed with less than three weeks of on-the-job training! The expensive college degree, key to middle-class employment and lifestyle, has become a necessary but insufficient credential.

This brief rehearsal of the history of adolescence reveals the ways in which youth have been abstracted or removed from key dimensions of human and community life—from attention to the common good, from significant social roles in communities, from families and other local authorities, from innate passions and sensibilities (intellectual curiosity, compassion, passion for life, beauty, and justice), and from their own powers as subjects and agents in history. As we contemplate the vocation of youth as youth, it is critical to make this distinction: These abstractions represent a shift in social resources available for empowering youth, not a change in the fundamental capacities of youth—curiosity, yearning for social equilibrium, and creativity. Despite these historical shifts that remove youth from significant social roles and a sense of their own agency, it is also important to remember the roles youth once played as yearning for and bearing beauty, energy, creativity and justice. In fact, even amidst social movements that tend to domesticate youth, young people have played key roles in every peace and justice movement in modern history. We need only recall the important role of SNCC and SCLC in the civil rights era. Indeed, some observers think we are today seeing a new resurgence of youth.

Theories of adolescence

Significantly, there was no formal theory confirming adolescence as a discrete time of life until the beginning of the twentieth century. Interestingly, some of the early research on adolescents was conducted by the early psychologists of religion, William James, Edwin D. Starbuck, and G. Stanley Hall. Prompting their interest was the observation that teens were over-represented in religious revivals, especially among those responding to conversion and mission work. This research sparked James’ work on sudden conversion and healthy-mindedness. Starbuck and Hall tied adolescence to idealism and moral heroism, helping to upgrade adolescence as a discrete stage of life. Writing in 1904, Hall produced two ponderous volumes destined to become the definitive theory of adolescence for most of the first half of the twentieth century. G. Stanley Hall characterized adolescence as the “vernal season of the heart.”

This golden stage of adolescence when life glistens and crepitates … has wrought a great work in the world and infected it with love of beauty everywhere. It is the vernal season of the heart and the greatest stimuli for the imagination … Their bud is curiosity … [S]taring, experimenting with sensation, surprise, active observation, the passion to touch, handle, taste everything, often apparent cruelty due to the lust to know.

Hall posited adolescence as a time of life in which people are most fully alive; curious about the world, connected to each other, passionate about life and its possibilities. He observes that scientists, poets, and philosophers are first awakened to their poten-
tial in this adolescence springtime of life. Hence, not only is adolescence a golden time of life in which life is embraced with passion, but youth themselves also bear the seeds of their passion for making change in the world. Not only was Hall drawing from his work on youth and conversion, but from the relatively recent memory of the rituals of youth in pre-industrial villages in which youth are sources of justice, beauty, and creativity. These somewhat romantic visions of youth were celebrated by artists and poets as diverse as Delacroix, Byron, Shelley, and Keats, and political philosophers such as Rousseau.

Yet despite this high view of adolescent power, Hall’s theory takes an ironic turn that would ultimately serve to domesticate youth. While insisting that adolescence is a vernal season of life, he warns that these golden energies are wasted by youth, many of whom were displaced in urban contexts from communities and jobs. In describing the situation of youth he lamented that the energies of youth were like a raging mountain river rushing down to the sea, which becomes diffuse streams and rivulets trickling to their end. Like his contemporary Sigmund Freud, Hall viewed life as holding finite life energy, and predicted that wasting it in adolescence would leave a spent adulthood. Utilizing the emergent vision of hydro-electric energy, he concluded that it was the duty of society to build “dams” to contain and control the energies of youth. Hall’s theory became a primary rationale for various means of social control, such as that characterized in the high school movement, the YMCA, Scouting, Christian youth groups, association meetings, and the juvenile justice system. The irony of Hall’s theory, which would become evident by mid-century, is that when adolescent life becomes contained and controlled, it risks losing its vitality—acquiescent to domesticated middle-class manners but devoid of curiosity and creativity.

While many theorists have contributed to our understanding of adolescence, Erik Erikson elaborated the most prominent psycho-social theory since the mid-twentieth century. Erikson rejected Freud’s psychosexual reductionism, and instead spoke of the positive role of society in shaping the identities of young people. According to Erikson’s psychosocial model of human development, group identity precedes individual identity. Identity formation—the task of adolescence—involves negotiating ideologies and values for organizing one’s life. That is, individuals come to see themselves as belonging to a group, learn to resolve conflicts through groups, and eventually see themselves as defined through this intricate web of relationships. Ego identity is a precipitate of its relations with others and depends on the ability of the individual to integrate these residues of identifications with others into a coherent whole. As the gaze of the mother orients the emergent self of the infant, so do societies reflect validation or invalidation to adolescents, helping give birth to their identity.

Yet, Erikson is not merely describing an easy unilateral assimilation of youth to a static societal ethos. Although Erikson is often interpreted as affirming social conformity, he points to the dynamism at the heart of the life cycle. He says

It is for adult man (sic) to provide content for the ready loyalty of youth, and worthy objects for its need to repudiate. As culture, through graded training, enters into the fiber of young individuals, they also absorb into their lifeblood the rejuvenation power of youth. Adolescence is thus a vital regenerator in the
process of social evolution; for youth selectively offers its loyalties and energies to the conservation of that which feels true to them and to the correction or destruction of that which has lost its regenerative significance.17

Here Erikson seems to pick up Hall’s theme of the important role of youth in keeping social equilibrium: he observed that youth will not simply be contented to assimilate to a distorted culture, but will also be drawn to and work for its wholeness. This possibility is vividly demonstrated in Erikson’s account of Young Man Luther in which he depicts Martin’s struggle with guilt introjected from his father and mirrored in the authoritarian Roman Catholic hierarchy. In negotiating his identity, Martin found himself not only striking out against his father and the Catholic Church, but also changing history.

While critiques of their methodologies exist, Hall and Erikson illuminate an important role of young people in the human life cycle as prophetic voices bringing critical perspectives for the good of the world and the human family. Hall views the eros of youth as not simply sexual, but as a force that compels their intellectual, affective, and practical powers in a yearning for beauty and wholeness. While these powers lack precision, they are caught up in a romance with all of life that culminates in adulthood in refined works of art, science, and politics. Erikson is more rigorously communitarian in his vision of youth. He asserts that youth require adults who, in supporting youth, find important benefits for their own growth in virtue. For Erikson, social virtue is caught up in something like a loop in which youth learn virtues through the ideas and practices of the culture; where these values are distorted, youth serve to amplify and correct them.

**Toward a theology of youth**

Once created, the institution of adolescence seems to have been promptly forgotten or reified—simply asserted as natural—by most Americans. However, if Americans generally have ignored its historical development, theologians have attended even less to adolescence. Youth have been subject to many of the same theological invectives as children, including Augustine’s notion of original sin, Martin Luther’s call to instill obedience by breaking the child’s will, and Aquinas’ privileging reason as the chief marker of a full and Christian life. These and other theological notions have served to portray children and youth as “unfinished adults” with little intrinsic theological significance. However, youth have been subject to even more intense judgment, especially as they have come into their sexual, intellectual, and creative powers. Theologians from St. Augustine to Jonathan Edwards have warned about youthful lust and frivolity as a threat to Christian faith, not suspecting that these energies may represent important charisms. Yet, despite the relative inattention or aspersions of theologians, there are resources in biblical and doctrinal tradition to warrant a theological recontextualization of adolescence.

While the biblical writers knew nothing of adolescence as a discrete stage of life, there are many stories about young men and women emerging from childhood into the fullness of their sexual, intellectual, and creative powers. The most familiar of these
include the story of young David who fearfully rises to the challenge against Goliath and in the process finds power and skill to vanquish his foe. We recall young Samuel who hears God’s call in the night and awakens to a life of service, or the stammering young Moses who becomes the deliverer of God’s people. In the New Testament, a paradigmatic story involves Jesus as a young boy.

Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom. After the Feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers (NIV Luke 2:41-48).

While this story of Jesus’ youth does not contain the same validation that Jesus bestows on children in Matthew 18—“unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven,” it does stand as a symbol of the emerging intellectual, physical, and creative powers of youth as participating in the grace of God, even (especially?) when they represent a challenge to families and religious traditions. And further, we might wonder if this story is paradigmatic enough to at least suspect that the redactors included it as a tacit charge, “Unless you become like youth, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Of course, these must remain as speculations, nevertheless these biblical images of young people function as counterpoint to much of a Christian tradition that is suspicious of the burgeoning energies of youth.

From time to time Christian faith has been envisioned as a dour affair, neglectful of human passion, beauty, and creativity; one which rests on the assumption of a dispassionate, unmoving God. Yet, at the heart of Christian doctrine we are confronted by a God whose life is characterized as trinitarian communion, an inter-penetrating, interrelating dance of love. This mutually suffering relationality is not static or self-contained, but bursts forth in creative power. As God gives life to one and then another creature, the Bible describes a sense of delight or glory as God proclaims it “good.”

God’s power of creativity is a central theme of the Hebrew Bible as Godbirths a people, a land, and a vision of shalom. The paradigmatic act of creativity is seen as God in Jesus Christ creates life from death and a church in the power of this new life. Theologian Karl Barth characterized Christian discipleship as a perichoretic dance in which we are taken up into relationship with Christ so that we flourish as humans. Far from diminishing humanity, Barth views Christ as grounding and empowering our full humanity. Despite certain Gnostic and Victorian interpreters, human life is not obliterated but instead flourishes in relationship with Christ. As Irenaeus asserted in the second century, “the glory of God is humanity fully alive.” To be sure, the fullness of humanity, like the creativity of God, is grounded in care and vulnerability, but in such relationality we find surprising new powers for life and glory. Perhaps more than any other time of life, youth represents an awakening to the goodness of life and one’s own
creative powers. The vital presence of young people reminds us of the goodness of cre-
ation and our hope for flourishing as embodied creations, and in so doing provides a glimpse into the *imago Dei* (image of God).

Youth are vivid reminders of the creative powers that human persons embody as gifts of God. Each young person represents a surprising *charism* waiting to be revealed for the healing of the world. Such gifts of power are not simply for solitary enjoyment, but are gifts that allow the community to embody the beauty of God in its particular context. Neither is opening such gifts a solitary venture in which youth merely “find themselves,” but require what Robert Kegan calls a “holding environment”—spaces of support in which youth can risk new ideas and directions, but which also involve the challenges of adults. This is suggestive for the practice of the church in empowering youth. For the congregation, holding and empowering youth may be seen as a “means of grace,” as the budding glory of youth holds a mirror to our forgotten or suppressed powers. Engaging the growing intellectual powers of youth forces the church to address afresh questions of tradition and traditionalism. Faced by teenagers’ hunger for relationships, we may discover our own yearning for love. Learning to hold youth through the changes of adolescence also creates new virtues in congregations—new capacities for patience, listening, non-anxious presence, relatedness, caring disputation, wonder, and celebration—that will extend more generally to the range of congregational and social relationships. By teenagers we are reminded, “When I love God I love the beauty of bodies, the rhythm of movements, the shining of eyes, the embraces, the feelings, the scents, the sounds of all this protean creation … The experience of God deepens the experiences of life … It awakens the unconditional Yes to life.”

This historical, theoretical, and theological overview suggests that young people play an important creative and critical role in the human and created family, and should be seen as participating in God’s grace not simply as recipients, but as means of grace. I do not want to romanticize youth by suggesting that all youth embrace these capacities fully or appropriately, since, for example, this culture exploits the beauty of youth for marketing purposes, thus inhibiting their other powers (for example, of intellectual curiosity and social awareness) and since communities have forgotten how to hold youth in ways that unfold their *charisms*. Further, even youth with adequate support will sometimes make choices that do not choose life. Still, unless we as a church allow our imaginations to be sparked by historical and theological alternatives we risk complicity in the narrowing of human life and faith. While these few remarks cannot constitute a theology of youth, perhaps they may serve to highlight youth as important for whom they are now, not merely as the presumed “future.” May these images supply our imaginations with new possibilities for ministry that support and are nourished by the flourishing of youth.

**NOTES**


4. The example is from Kett. However, this is a theme that runs through many historical accounts of adolescence, including John Taylor Gatto, *The Underground History of American Education: A Schoolteacher's Intimate Investigation Into the Problems of Modern Schooling* (New York: Oxford Village, 2000).

5. Gatto, especially in chapter one—page 4 and following.


9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., 26–27.

11. Schultz, et. al. *Dancing in the Dark: Popular Culture and the Electronic Media* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990). In this volume, the authors argue that there would be no adolescence as we know it without the entertainment media, and no entertainment media as we know it without adolescents.

12. James E. Côté and Alton L. Allahar, *Generation on Hold: Coming of Age in the Late Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1996). These authors suggest that youth have become the new source of cheap labor for businesses that have capitalized on the diminished status of youth and have restructured the wage scale. There is an increased concentration of jobs at the bottom and upper-middle segments of wage distribution. There is a resulting decline in the wage-base of young people due to an increase in middle-aged workers who consolidated their position in the upper middle class for whom the average wages rose 6%. The result is an increase in unemployment and poverty among youth. Since 1973 there has been a relative decrease in wages (declined 26% since 1973). Youth now on average earn less than 70% of what adult white males make, as opposed to 94% in 1967.

13. A friend reported that in the recent Iowa caucus over 70% of the participants in her caucus were 17-year-olds who will only come of voting age just prior to the election in November. Also, despite the church and society's sluggish response to issues such as world poverty, we are hearing reports that youth are embracing, partly through Internet services like Facebook and Myspace, micro-financing ventures like KIVA where they can make small donations that are given as loans to developing world entrepreneurs. It may be too soon to judge the strength or significance of such movements.


15. Hall, 143.


18. Although in vernacular the terms “adolescent,” “teenagers,” and “youth” are used interchangeably, they denote historical shifts that are significant. The term “teenager” came into use by the 1940s and was coined by marketers to denote a new market niche. Some use the term “adolescent” to refer to physiological and psychological developmental changes. I do not object

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You argue that we adults in the church should live alongside our youth rather than sending them to the so-called “youth room” until they grow up. And this is not only so they can benefit from us in the process of becoming the adults God made them to be. Rather, you want us to think of them as partners who contribute creative energy to our lives and our communities. Do you really believe youth can revive our curiosity about God, worship, and mystery?

I do. Let me tell you a story about that. It was my first Sunday on the staff in Upland, California, and my first time teaching the junior high Sunday school class. I had never met the kids I was teaching before. But was I ever prepared! I was doing my doctoral work and so I had this really sophisticated pedagogical approach with lots of questions and learning activities.

So I walked in and launched into my lesson, and the kids were seated on a sofa against the wall—kind of leaning on each other. And after about five minutes, one of the boys raised his hand and said, “I’ve got a question,” and I said, “Okay.” He said, “Yeah, my question is, Why do we have to be here?” And I said, “What do you mean?” He said, “What is Sunday school for?” And being a good teacher, I naturally said—“Why do you think?”

And so the group had a conversation among themselves. They developed a fairly sophisticated theory that Sunday school is actually a device of torture created by adults; specifically, that adults know that young people don’t like to get up early on Sunday morning, so we make them get up early. They know we don’t like dress up, so we make them dress up. They know we don’t like hot stuffy little classrooms, so we put them in hot stuffy little classrooms.

But they were still wanting to know what I thought. And so I said, “I have a suggestion. Why don’t we go next door to the adult Sunday school class and ask the adults.” And so all twelve of us stood up and marched next door, and I knocked on the door to the adult Sunday school class and I said, “Our class has some questions we want to ask.” And of course the adults were surprised, but they said come on in. Billy asked, “Why do we have to go to Sunday school?” At first the adults were defensive, but then you could see them struggling to answer, and even taking on Billy’s question for themselves. “What’s so important about us doing this on Sunday mornings?” they asked. “Is there a history to this?” Nobody could remember!

And then, after awhile, something really interesting happened. The youth started making alternative suggestions about Christian education possibilities. The adults were responsive and things got really creative. We ended up developing this whole Wednesday night venue where we had church dinners and small groups and classes … all as a result of the received curiosity of the youth of the church.
Youth are curious, you’re saying, and we need to take that seriously rather than dismissing it or—more likely—simply missing it. I’m pretty sure my knee jerk reaction to a kid interrupting me, my first Sunday there, five minutes into a lesson with the question, “Why do we have to be there?” would be that he was just trying to be a troublemaker, entertain his friends, or draw attention to himself. So are you saying that, even if it might be true that on some level he was trying to be a “clown,” we’d better be on the lookout for the “something else” that is going on? There’s a core point here, and it is that when we don’t take youth seriously, when we assume that being flip or troublemakers is all they’re capable of, then these become default roles for them. But when they understand that we are taking them seriously, they rise to meet that expectation.

When we don’t take youth seriously, when we assume that being flip or troublemakers is all they’re capable of, then these become default roles for them. But when they understand that we are taking them seriously, they rise to meet that expectation. It’s exciting to see what happens when you create a culture where the expectation levels are raised.

How can the adults of the church do a better job of taking youth seriously?

My experience is that young people in the church really want two things. Contrary to all our assumptions, they yearn for relationships with adults. And secondly, they really do yearn for something to do with their lives that has meaning. To offer an anecdote related to this: when I worked at the Youth Theological Institute (YTI) at Emory, we had rising high school seniors—very bright kids from all over the United States—coming and studying Barth and Tillich!
That’s wonderful.
And these kids were “getting it,” too! Here’s what they consistently told us: that they considered themselves “refugees” from church youth groups. They said that all church youth groups offered them was pizza and lock-ins, and that what they really wanted was something that engaged them and stimulated them and stretched them and empowered them.

So how did they do? Did you give them assignments from Barth and Tillich and then they’d read them and come in and talk about them? Like a class?

At YTI we set up four-week residential communities where we studied together and worshiped every evening. In the afternoons we often did some kind of service project or urban immersion experience. Sometimes we had guest lecturers or small group conversations in dorms and across campus at Emory. And every morning for two hours, every kid was involved in a topical study group. There was a course on metaphorical theology, for example, where they read Sallie McFague. And there was another on the theology of Saint Augustine. I did a course on liberation theology, and they had readings just like a seminary class and they would come in and discuss. They would spend hours every evening reading and talking and trying to get a sense for what was at stake. And they were great at it. They really did get it in part because they wanted something substantive, and in part because they knew we expected them to.

Because you took them seriously.

That’s right. It’s exciting to see what happens when you create a culture where the expectation levels are raised. A lot of these young people I first worked with (beginning back in 1992) are today in public service as attorneys or teachers. Some of them are missionaries or pastors.

One big steeple pastor told a story about how he felt led to begin mentoring those members of his congregation who were in high school whom he thought might eventually be called to the ministry. The father of one of the young people he discussed this with called him up, irate, and said, “How dare you tell my son he should consider being a minister! I want my son to be a lawyer or a doctor.” I think this ambivalence you’ve named before is all too real. We’re not sure that we want to be in the Sunday school class, ourselves!

We’re not sure we want our youth to take the gospel seriously, which is one reason why we don’t take their questions and commitments seriously. I remember a young woman who was a part of our four-week residential community. In the course of our time with us, she explored issues related to the media and entertainment industry and their symbiotic relationship with youth: how youth are shaped as passive consumers. She asked great questions about sweatshops, social injustice, living simply, Christian practices. She was really convinced and convicted by a lot of what she heard. And she went home, and the next week loaded up a lot of her clothes and took them down to the homeless shelter. In deciding to live more simply, she took down all of her rock posters and made a commitment to volunteer at the homeless shelters. To put it bluntly: her parents were outraged.
They weren’t expecting her to come home different, as a result of experiencing the gospel.

One of the mistakes we make, as church adults, is that we hope our youth will simply assimilate to whatever norms and perspectives we’ve held all these years. Another is that we imagine there is no possibility of integration and synergy, and that youth will only respond to entertainment, consumerist models, or popular culture. What I am advocating for is a third option: an approach in which we envision, as congregations, the possibility that our lives and our churches can be enriched by young people. They need us, we need them, and we have gifts to offer each other.

It’s not just that youth are being formed by adults, but adults are being formed by youth.

That’s right. At best, youth remind us of what we love, and what we yearn for, and what we seek in our lives. Now, I don’t want to romanticize youth, here. There will always be brokenness in adolescents, because there is always brokenness in people. But (speaking developmentally) adolescence is a time when human beings are open to their burgeoning powers of heart and mind. And this openness—this drive, this curiosity, this energy and vitality—this is a true gift. Youth remind us that we can participate in the beauty and glory of God.

And by “beauty” I’m including ethical concerns; their questioning of systems and relationships and their hunger for justice and life and organic wholeness. This is what the very nature of God is all about, isn’t it? Flourishing in creativity and beauty. Adolescents, I believe, provide a window into not only the relationality of God, but the glory of God. And in showing us the fullness of God, they help us live into our own created and creative fullness.

Austin Seminary faculty writes on children and youth …

*Awakening Youth Discipleship: Christian Resistance in a Consumer Culture* (Cascade, 2008) by David White and others


*Graced Vulnerability: A Theology of Childhood* (Pilgrim Press, 2005) by David Jensen

“How Faith Helped Me See” (in *Journeys*, vol. 10, no. 1) by David Lee Jones

*Losers, Loners, and Rebels: The Spiritual Struggles of Boys* (WJK, 2007) by Allan Cole and others

*Practicing Discernment with Youth* (Pilgrim Press, 2005) by David White
What do you want to do when you grow up?” “It's clear you have gifts for ministry—have you considered attending seminary?” “You really love being with children—maybe God is calling you to be a teacher.” These are all questions we might hear if we listened in on church leaders engaging young people in conversations about vocation. We might also hear discussions of Frederick Buechner’s definition of vocation, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” I have heard a variation of this that encourages discerning vocation through the intersection of one’s passion, one’s gifts, and the world’s needs. I have also heard a joke that what Buechner should have penned was that the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness, the world’s deep hunger, and your trust fund meet—a lighthearted way of pointing out that this view of vocation may be the privileged view of those with the freedom, resources, and education to choose their path in life.

It is a very good thing to help the youth in our congregations think about their future career plans in light of their gifts and passions and the world’s needs, particularly if those conversations take place in a context that understands vocation as God’s call on our lives. We should also offer youth an understanding of vocation that is bigger than career discernment, that applies to all God’s children regardless of privilege, and that doesn’t require waiting until you are an adult to realize. Scripture is a rich resource for engaging youth in such conversation on vocation.

The stories of leaders called by God are a good place to begin exploring vocation. Even a quick overview shows us that the people God calls aren’t always gifted for (think stuttering Moses) or passionate about (think sullen Jonah) the tasks God appoints to them. Tom Walker points out in an interview on Cloud of Witnesses that biblical call

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**Beyond Career Counseling: Youth, Vocation, and Witness**

*Amy Scott Vaughn*

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narratives don’t begin with “let me identify my gifts” but rather with an understanding that one has been chosen.² Jeremiah’s call illustrates that we are chosen long before we know our gifts and what we enjoy doing. “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you” (Jeremiah 1:5a). When Jeremiah protests that he is too young for the job, God responds, “Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you” (Jeremiah 1:7). The prophet Samuel is called by God to deliver a difficult message to Eli when he is only a boy. Mary is called to be the mother of Jesus when she is only a teen. Vocation does not wait until college diplomas are in hand or career plans are in place.

Jesus’ final words to the disciples give us a helpful image for understanding what vocation looks like for a young person. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Here is where we find the identity and purpose, the vocation, that youth desire. All Christians are called to serve as witnesses—not just those who volunteer to serve on the evangelism committee, not just adults, not just those who know what they want to be when they grow up, not just those who have their act together. Karl Barth proposes that our very identity as Christians is rooted not in the benefits of personal salvation we have received, but in our calling to serve as witnesses. He says of Christians, “with their whole being, action, inaction, and conduct, and then by word and speech, they have to make a definite declaration to other [people]. The essence of their vocations is that God makes them witnesses.”³ As youth search for identity and purpose in life, they can hold firmly to the knowledge that bearing witness to Christ is at the heart of their lifelong vocation, no matter what their career path. They can find courage in the knowledge that the Holy Spirit will empower them to be witnesses even when they doubt their own gifts and faith.

Part of being a witness is observing God’s activity in the world. We can teach youth to look for signs of grace, paying attention to the presence of God in their lives and communities, asking the question, What is God doing here that I can get in on? Being a witness also means bearing witness or giving testimony to what we have seen and known. This doesn’t happen just through speech, of course, but through all of our actions. In bearing witness, we move beyond ourselves, pointing to another. Daniel Migliore writes that witnesses “draw attention not to themselves, but to someone or some event distinct from themselves … and the act of witness is self-involving, requiring personal participation, commitment, and risk.”⁴ Bearing witness is self-involving, but it is not self-absorbed, and Christian witness is more often communal than individual.

Adults in the church can help youth to live out their vocations and to define themselves as witnesses rather than as consumers. The first way we can help youth to be witnesses is to be witnesses ourselves. We need to share faith and not just pizza with the young people of the church. We are not called to be role models or pied pipers, but messengers of God’s love. Robin Maas points out the necessity, and the difficulty, of adults serving at witnesses for youth, “Youth work is very appealing because young peo-
people are so responsive, so appreciative, and so easily idolize their leaders. The great temptation of the youth leader, therefore, is to say: “Come to me, come to me.” What they should be saying is “Go to him, go to him.”

We can also help youth to be witnesses by seeing them as witnesses. We should expect young people to witness and understand this as an important part of who they are. The way we view youth affects their identity formation. If we see them as witnesses, they will come to understand this as central to their identity. The church leaders I meet in my work see young people as witnesses. They tell me stories of youth in Seattle who give up their Spring break each year to build houses in Mexico. They tell stories of youth in Westfield, New Jersey, who run a soup kitchen that they started themselves. They tell stories of youth across the country who bear witness to the gospel in ways that sometimes challenge their congregations—inviting illegal immigrants to find shelter, questioning fiscal decisions, making worship more welcoming to young people.

The story of Eli and Samuel offers further guidance for adults as we think about youth and vocation. When the boy Samuel hears someone calling to him in the night, Eli helps him to discern that this is God’s call and instructs him to reply “Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:9). Eli offers his wisdom to the boy, even though he may have been surprised that God’s call came to the servant boy rather than to one of his own adult sons. Eli also encourages Samuel to bear witness to what he has seen and heard, even though Samuel’s words give a dire judgment against Eli and his sons. May we be “Eli’s to the youth in our midst, helping them to discern God’s call and encouraging them to live as witnesses, even when the words they speak and the lives they live challenge our own complacency.

NOTES


The young couple enters my office, nervous and giddy with love. They are planning their wedding, and since they are the first of their friends to get married, they are not sure what to do. I place my file and pen on the coffee table and sit down with them. Different couples want different things, but it is clear that this soon-to-be bride and groom need a pastor more than a service-planner.

“How did you two meet?” I ask because I am interested and hoping to calm their nerves.

“Over the Internet,” they respond in unison and laugh. She takes over the conversation, saying that they both worked on a political campaign, and their love blossomed between facebook messages. They became more than “friends.” After exchanging smiles, he grabs her hand, and she turns a deeper shade of red. I grin along with them as the contagious happiness of the blushing bride and groom spreads.

There is more going on in this scene than young love. It is another reminder of just how much things have changed. Now, most of the men and women I marry have met over the ’net. The Internet has become a powerful force in building relationships, and one of the amazing and challenging things about ministering with youth in the 21st century is that we have so many new means of communicating and building community.

As we watch new technologies grow and expand, most teenagers easily adapt to the innovations, incorporating them into their lives instantly. Marshall McLuhan wrote forty years ago that every technology extends or amplifies some organ or faculty of the user. Now we see how the computer becomes an extension of our brains. For youth, it changes the way they process information, communicate with each other, and build friendships.

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The Internet developed in three waves. The first wave was for military defense, the second was one-sided websites and commerce, and the third was interactive. We often refer to this latest surge as Web 2.0. It includes weblogs (or blogs), rating systems, evites, social networking sites, and wiki applications (websites which allow anyone to create and edit the pages).

Although the community-building possibilities are exciting, we are also discovering unchartered land. Jed Koball, a pastor who works with youth at Larchmont Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York, primarily uses facebook to communicate with his group, but when it comes to some ethical decisions he says, “I feel like I’m navigating new territory with an old map.”

He’s right. We all are. We construct this atlas as we work together. We sketch out the coastlines in our seminary conversations and collegial discussions. We know it should include a variety of landscapes, especially advice to our seminary students on how much information they should post, and counsel to pastoral search committees on how much to rely on Googled information on candidates.

When focusing our attentions to ministry with youth, we realize many potential bumps and pitfalls in our new terrain. Limiting my attention to social networking sites, I can point out some of the areas of concern, especially regarding our public and private roles as pastors, our ethical boundaries while working with teenagers, and our moral responsibilities to our youth.

**Public and private roles as pastors**

Facebook is a social networking site, where anyone over the age of thirteen can join. When I entered the ranks of facebook, I was the host of my site. Then I searched for other people who hosted their own sites on the larger network and asked them to be “friends.” One by one, each person accepted or rejected my friendship request. Soon, I had a collection of friends who shared information, such as family pictures and party invitations. Friends play trivia and word games. Plus, I have a status line, which says, “Carol …” and I fill it in with utterly mundane information like, “Carol is starting her vacation today. Hooray!”

I woke up early one morning this week to find that one of my facebook friends had updated his status as “up early, with the runs.” To which I thought, Bummer. Then I remembered that he was a youth pastor—who has over eight hundred friends. I couldn’t help but realize that this small revelation brings us to a whole new level of transparency in youth work.

As pastors, we are public figures. But just how public do we want to become? It might be fun to reminisce about the fishbowl margaritas that we enjoyed in seminary, but do we want the teenagers in our church to see photos of us with them? Since there is no way to distinguish between a personal or professional friendship on facebook (although there is a way to limit profiles), the information I share with high school buddies is the same information I share with a befriended teenager in the church.
Ethical boundaries with teenagers

As I was reminded in my church office, relationships blossom over social networking sites. Unfortunately, it follows that inappropriate bonds can form as well. For instance, Adam Copeland (a seminary intern in Scotland) explained, “I have a friend who is currently playing a raucous game of ‘scrabulous’ with a college professor. This game includes playing all hours of the day, consistently thinking about one another, and engaging in several bawdy scrabulous plays. The professor and student can also access photos of each other, view each other’s status, see what books each is reading, and send each other gifts. None of this is inappropriate on the surface, but it does present new, disconcerting, possibilities.”

Since the potential for inappropriate relationships with minors can form, some pastors only communicate with teens as a group, or on the “Wall” (the place for public communication on Facebook), while others have no problem with one-on-one communication. Shawn Coons, an associate pastor at St. Philip Presbyterian Church in Houston, wrote, “We have to be able to talk with youth individually, and we have to be able to talk to them in the ways that they are willing to talk.”

Moral responsibility to youth

With additional information, we have new responsibilities. Susan Olson, a campus minister at Yale University, relayed a Facebook story that highlights our obligations to youth with this new medium. One of her students wrote in her status line that she “is sad.” The next day she “is bummed.” The next day she “hates her life.” Susan immediately contacts the student, who says, “I knew you’d call.”

As pastors, we know that if teenagers are engaged in risky behavior in which they are harming or being harmed, and we are in the room, then we are responsible to respond. But there is a lot of gray area on Facebook and our roles can become complicated. A minor can post photos of herself drinking or doing something inappropriate, and it is often difficult to know what to do.

As a response, many pastors do not initiate friendships on Facebook. Instead, they only accept “requests” from their youth. That way, they have been invited into the room and can respond with that in mind.

As educators and church leaders, as we work with teenagers and technology continues to evolve, it will be important to keep sketching fresh maps and thinking about the possibilities and pitfalls of a new generation.
Suzanne is a bright, attractive young adult. Nearing thirty years old, she asked to meet me for coffee on a Saturday. An aeronautical engineer working with the Boeing corporation, she was just promoted yet again. As we sat down in overstuffed chairs at the coffee shop, she thanked me for meeting her. “Of course,” I replied. “What’s on your mind? Oh, and by the way, I heard about your new promotion. Congratulations.” She looked down and smiled. “I guess that’s what’s on my mind,” she said. She then went on to explain that she was rising quickly at work, gaining new responsibilities with a steady increase in pay. Then she looked at me and said, “I have been praying and thinking and while I appreciate the recognition and the good salary, I am wondering if this is it—if I am really doing what God created me to do.”

Suzanne was a child of the church. She grew up in a faithful family, was in worship every Sunday, received yearly perfect attendance pins for Sunday school, and loved youth group. She went through confirmation and on mission trips and to conferences. In college, she was part of the Asian American Campus Fellowship. She was a Bible study leader and now was a youth group advisor and a deacon. “For a while now,” she explained, “my energies have been around school, getting my master’s in engineering, and my work. And as I think about doing this work for the next few years—never mind for the rest of my life—I simply can’t stand it. I’m just not sure this is what God is calling me to do.”

As we talked for the next couple of hours, I began to get a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. I remembered when she graduated from high school as an honors student. I remembered when she graduated from college magna cum laude. I remembered when she gained admission to the competitive master’s-degree program in aeronautical engineering. I remembered when she got her first job at Boeing. The church

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had affirmed her with each accomplishment. Then she named my growing discomfort. “You know what I have come to realize?” she said. “I have come to realize that my whole life I have been looking ahead … looking at the next step … the next task. I’ve never stopped to just listen to God and hear what I am supposed to be doing right now … not next … but right now.” That was it.

As we talked, I thought back to a conversation I had years ago with a mentor and friend, the late professor David Ng who taught at Austin Seminary and San Francisco Theological Seminary. In one conversation, David reminded me that in ministry with young people, the church’s goal is not entertainment—the idea that we have to keep youth happy and entertained from moment-to-moment with seamless programming so we keep their attention. He also said the church’s goal is not protection—the idea that with so much temptation in the world, our job is to hold our young people in a safe place so they never encounter sin or evil or temptation. He said the church’s goal is not even fellowship—the idea that we build a tight-knit community that borders on co-dependency. And he taught me that the church’s goal in ministry with young people is not about maintenance—the idea that youth ministry is some kind of an ecclesial purgatory where we keep young people in a holding pattern until they mature and can contribute to the congregation’s life in a significant and lasting way. David was the first person to warn me when I heard anyone say something like, “youth are the future of the church,” because often what they meant was youth are not capable of being the church today. They must bide their time and earn the privilege of being the church. David told me that the proper thing to say and believe was that “youth are the future of the church as well as the church today” and the goal of ministry with young people is to call them to be disciples of Jesus here, now, as well as in the future.

As Suzanne and I talked, I thought that somehow we missed conveying that message to her. Over and over, through worship, church school, vacation Bible school, youth group, and even confirmation, we taught her that the Christian journey was coming when she graduated from high school and then when she graduated from college and then when she finished graduate school and got a job and got married and had kids and could tithe. Then, lo and behold, the Christian journey for which she had been preparing all of these years would be upon her and she would be ready. But that was truly absurd, and now, on the verge of her thirtieth year, she was more than a little resentful.

“I am not blaming anyone, really,” she said. “I love this church and everyone has always supported me and encouraged me, but don’t you think that at some point along the way someone was supposed to stop and ask me what the Holy Spirit was calling me to do and to be right then … not fifteen years in the future? I think back to the highest points in my faith, and, you know, I keep coming back to that mission trip when I was in high school and we spent that week teaching those kids in that church in Central Washington. I loved that. I loved everything about it and if I could do anything right now, I think that would be it.”

We talked further and then prayed together, and as I was driving home, I thought about that mission trip. We spent a week with a small church in Wapato, Washington. The congregation consisted mostly of migrant farm families. We led daily vacation
Bible school taking care of the children while their parents were working and we helped paint the church and do minor repairs. We slept in tents pitched around the church building and one night awoke in the early morning hours to the loudest claps of thunder I had ever heard as lightning flashed around us and rain soaked our tents and wind threatened to carry us away. We shared meals with the congregation daily. And on the last Sunday there, we participated in the worship of God. Suzanne was one of those who preached that day. And what occurred to me was that over the course of those days, these young people were not being entertained by high-powered glitzy presentations or protected from the world or focused internally on fellowship with each other or experiencing the maintenance of a holding pattern until they were ready for ministry. In those days, these young people were being the church. They were being disciples of Jesus, and Suzanne had recognized and claimed those days as a touchstone of significance and meaning in her life of faith. And yet, when we returned to her congregation of nurture, we fell back into the pattern of seeing young people as the future and not the present church. That is the challenge, isn’t it? To see our young people, really see them, not only as the future, not as incomplete adults, or as youth to be entertained, protected, or maintained but as disciples here and now so that they may respond as witnesses to the gospel so that all may come to know and believe that Jesus lives in our midst.

White: The vocation of youth … as youth
Continued from page 12

to this use of the term, but it remains problematic as a social institution. I choose to use the term “youth” instead of “adolescent,” since as we have seen the term “adolescent” implies a social institution that involves a number of abstractions that are not inherent in youth at their best. The term “youth” is older and, at least for me, connotes social contexts that nourished the vital and prophetic roles of youth.

20. Moltmann, 98.
The church I am visiting is a large Protestant congregation in the suburban edges of a major city, among the few mainline congregations growing in membership and capital projects. Mature trees ring its grounds, which are carefully landscaped and maintained. It’s remarkably quiet, different from its frenetic surroundings.

One of the staff members, young and energetic, is eager to show me around in the time we have before the meeting I’m there to attend. He asks if I want to see the main sanctuary, but answers his own question before I can. “No, it’s really fairly typical,” he says, “beautiful like a hundred others you’ve seen.” We pass the sanctuary door on our way outside, where he leads me across a parking lot to one of three additional buildings that comprise the church complex. Our destination is the newest building, completed only the previous spring. Above the entrance, modern font letters, distinct from those on the Education Building and Family Life Center, announce its role in the life of the congregation: _______ Youth Center.

Inside, I feel as if I have walked into an upscale college student center. The lobby has ceramic tile flooring, comfortable sofas and chairs arranged in conversational rings, a sign that lists current and upcoming activities. My host offers me the choice of first visiting the gym, game room, or screening room, noting that since we’ll be meeting in the coffeehouse, we can save that for later. We enter the screening room, which has 150 permanent, theatre-style seats, with room for another fifty or so folding chairs. At the front of the room, a stage is available for plays and talent shows; at the back, the projectionist’s booth holds a sound system that would tempt many AV professionals with the deadly sin of envy. On our way to the coffeehouse, we pass quickly through the game room (foosball and ping-pong tables, four or five arcade-style games, including

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Faith Kirkham Hawkins

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my college favorite, Ms. Pac-Man) and gym (full-sized basketball court, a climbing wall). Nowhere do I see any indication that this is a church building. I recall the gym in my childhood Roman Catholic parish, borrowed from the parochial school for folk-music masses and overflow seating on Easter Sunday. I’d always found it a bit odd to worship with overhanging scoreboards and basketball hoops, and imagine that athletes found it equally odd to compete with a life-sized crucifix hanging on the wall of the upper balcony. I don’t think the gym I’ve just toured would benefit from that decorative touch, but I am aware of the contrast.

When the senior pastor joins the seven or eight of us sitting in the coffeehouse, he enthuses about the facility and its uses. Friday nights, the church offers an alternative to parties with alcohol or drugs; Sunday mornings the kids staffing the coffeehouse serve fresh-baked pastries as well as espresso and cappuccino. Finishing our discussion of our surroundings before officially starting the meeting, he laughs and admits, “Most of the adults are more than a little jealous.”

Several weeks later, I have a meeting at a different mainline church. No one offers a tour, but while searching for the restroom I pass by a large room identified by a construction-paper sign as the “Youth Room.” Garage-sale couches and chairs, teetering bookshelves with ’70’s-era Bibles and boxed games, a TV and several open DVD cases would signal the purpose of the room even if the sign were absent. Later on, the pastor refers to the area with some disappointment. “We’d love to have a more inviting place for youth, but there’s never enough money.”

As I’m driving back to my office, I find myself comparing the designated youth spaces at the two churches. I’m uncomfortable with the uncritical adoption of secular consumerism at _____________ Youth Center, but my speculation about other ways that money could have been spent is reflexive, the involuntary jerk of my lefty theological knee. I’m more surprised by my discomfort with the smaller Youth Room at the church I’ve just left. Particularly in comparison to the deluxe facilities elsewhere, such a modest space for youth should feel unremarkable. Shouldn’t it?

But it’s the second pastor’s discomfort that most intrigues me. Like many others I’ve met at smaller congregations, she seemed ashamed of the minimal space allocated to youth in her church. Her shame, and the first pastor’s pride, point to a shared understanding of what matters in youth ministry, perhaps even above all else: the facilities set aside for teens. Too many of our congregations allocate resources like many colleges competing for top-quality applicants, emphasizing buildings and amenities almost as a marketing tool. As a former college faculty member, I well know the pressures that lead to such decisions, as well as the frustrations with financial limits that prevent colleges from building terrific facilities and providing the best possible education through faculty hiring, support, and retention. As a passionate advocate for transformative approaches to ministry—with children, youth, and adults—I understand the strategy, but at the most fundamental level, I question it.

Ok, I’ll ‘fess up. I hate the strategy—and the perspectives on ministry with youth that undergird it. There are dozens of reasons why I react so strongly to the dominant priorities and perspectives regarding youth ministry at this time, but I continue my reflections focusing on just two here.
Contemporary youth ministry commodifies youth, church, and God

Contemporary American culture is dominated by the market economy. Markets in and of themselves are neutral in their effect on ministry with youth, but the hegemony of consumer culture today troubles me deeply. We “compete” for young people—for their presence in our churches, for their time, for their attention—until they are equated with market share rather than children of God. We “sell” them on our churches, providing (or wishing for) facilities that seem like entertainment complexes rather than sanctuaries. We offer activities that have as much, if not more, to do with entertainment than with worship, theological reflection, or the inbreaking of the kin-dom of God. Like successful car dealers, we excel at the bait-and-switch approach to youth ministry, enticing young people with fun and slipping them some God-talk along with their pizza and ice cream. This is not at all new: the youth program at the largest Protestant church in my childhood hometown attracted kids from every denomination to regular Sunday evening gatherings through the promise of pizza and games and the requirement that we attend a certain number of Sundays in order to be eligible for the ski trip each February.

Most unsettling to me, the market economy of youth ministry creates space on the shelves of adolescents’ lives for god as a product, rather than creating space for God to transform the lives of people young and old. This is one more instance of the eternal human tendency to put God in a box, and as troubling as I find other efforts to contain God, this one strikes me as particularly insidious. Selling God requires that we simplify (at best?) and misrepresent (at least) the complex mystery of God and his interactions with the world. The gospel, multifaceted and necessarily somewhat messy, is reduced to soundbites, degrading God in the process. Commodifying God is worse than creating him in our own image. Whereas holding to a theology in which God is like me—only wiser, stronger, purer—at least allows God to be living insofar as I am living, making of God a product for sale grotesquely desecrates God, sapping from her all life and all divinity. The dominant ideology of the market results in idolatrous and dangerous ministry with youth.

Contemporary youth ministry damages the people of God

Upon the resignation of the youth minister at my congregation, leaders of the church began discussion of the job description and search for a replacement. As is often the case, the desiderata were astonishing; Jesus himself was likely to fall short of the hopes of the search committee. When a committee member asked for my thoughts on the job description, I spoke rather iconoclastically. “We don’t need a youth minister,” I said. “In fact, the worst thing we could do for our youth would be to hire a youth minister.”

I fear that the undeniable benefits of professional specialization in ministry have blinded us to its detractors. In the case of ministry, reliance upon youth specialists carries particularly distressing risks. Designating particular individuals to respond to the gifts and needs of young people absolves the rest of us of this responsibility and contributes to generational segregation within the church. The well-known observation that 11:00 Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in American society is just as
true with regard to the generations as it is to different races, ethnicities, and socio-economic classes. Given the predominance of generational segregation within other areas of contemporary American life, it is at least as troubling.

Teenagers are increasingly isolated in American culture, in formal and informal ways. Formally, of course, schools are built upon the isolation of students by age, so that even within a single generation, elementary school children are separated from middle schoolers, both are separated from high schoolers, and all of these are relatively separate from adults (particularly so from senior citizens). Informally, young people today tend to live farther from their grandparents than in previous generations, and even neighborhoods are often largely segregated by age. Media and marketers have sliced the American public into ever-narrower age groups, as the advent of products targeting “tweeners” indicates. Churches, it seems, are among the few places remaining that might mitigate against age-related segregation, yet each designated minister for youth risks reinforcing, rather than challenging, the segregation of youth from children and adults.

The negative consequences upon young people of ghettoizing ministry with youth and the youth themselves are easy to discern, particularly when most churches face very high rates of turnover among youth ministers. We less often consider the consequences upon the children and adults within the church, which are similarly serious. I know, for instance, that my maternal grandmother was invigorated by living with us as I was growing up, and that her perspectives on the world were enriched by necessary interaction with our views. I watch with concern as my father, geographically distant from his children and grandchildren, grows out of touch with both unimportant elements of our culture (e.g., jargon and pop music) and with more significant elements, such as changing social attitudes towards homosexuality and environmental stewardship. Closer still, as a childless adult whose nieces and nephew live on another continent, I am keenly aware that my isolation increases my risk of intellectual arteriosclerosis.

Beyond the detrimental effects upon individuals, generational segregation within the church damages the whole. Today’s churches need more than ever the very gifts inherent among youth. Their energy and optimism about positively affecting the world is precisely what churches faced with seemingly intractable social and cultural problems need. Their lack of awareness about what might ruffle feathers could wonderfully counterbalance churches that are nervous about causing offense. Their unedited honesty might force us to recognize when the emperor is buck-naked. And only their presence as integrated and involved members of the church can help us live into our calling to be the body of Christ. Paul’s description of the church as the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12) emphasizes that the body needs all of its members to be whole. Even the most well-trained youth minister (or well-appointed youth center, for that matter) risks inadvertently amputating from the church some of the members of the body we most need to be the body.

In that conversation with a church friend about hiring a youth minister, I was asked what alternatives the church might consider. I suggested that there were numerous different ways the church might prioritize ministry with youth, but that all the variants shared certain elements. First among these was to make ministry with youth the
work of all of the pastors and staff members, and of all of the congregants. Certainly, particular individuals will demonstrate greater gifts for working with youth than others will, but no individual in a congregation should be a priori relieved of their responsibility to youth—which is best understood as their ability to respond to youth. One way of promoting communal youth ministry—and a second foundational element of an alternative approach to ministry with youth—was to integrate young people into every element of church life. “Adult education,” for instance, should include some classes designed to draw both adolescents and adults, and to foster their engagement with one another. Adults in these groups might benefit from a reminder that they are not expected to have the answers, but that they are encouraged to wrestle with their questions, uncertainties, and concerns openly, so that young people will see that such challenges are both normal and surmountable. Every committee in the church—including the vestry or session – should include at least one teenager. Within these mixed-generation groups, we should set the bar high for the involvement and responsibilities of youth, and then give the young people a boost. While we should honor the need for young people to enjoy “a room of their own” within the church, we must be careful that this does not become their only room—just as we take care that if we hire a youth minister, she is not their only minister. Finally, we should recognize that youth ministry includes the ministry of youth, and create opportunities for youth to engage in ministry—through mentoring younger church members, for instance, or planning and participating in regular worship services.

Each of these elements challenges the dominant paradigm of ministry with youth, and I believe that each one will contribute to an overall strengthening of that ministry. This means that we need not do all of these things at once—though doing only one of them will not be sufficient over the long run. I believe that efforts like these will strengthen the church, and increase the likelihood that young people will develop a theological curiosity and a Christian commitment that will stay with them through the rest of their lives. Most importantly, in helping the church be the body of Christ and in moving away from dominant cultural paradigms of age-segregation and market ideology, these efforts will go a long way toward helping the whole church know the vibrant and complex God who call us to relationship—with God, and with one another.

NOTES

1. As director of the Youth Theological Initiative at Emory University’s Candler School of Theology, a summer program of justice-seeking theological education for youth, I was all too aware of the effects of this culture, as part of my work was “selling” the program to young people, their parents and pastors, and potential donors.
What are some of the unique gifts that youth bring to the church and ministry?

**Ben Johnston-Krase, Associate Pastor for Campus and Young Adult Ministries, University Presbyterian Church, Austin, Texas**

Our youth infuse church life with tremendous formational energy. Growing through their teenage years and into their early twenties, our youth move through significant stages of social development and self-discovery. Questions like, What do you want to be when you grow up? morph into more abstract, meaningful ones like, What am I good at? What do I really enjoy in life? and What’s ultimately important to me? When it comes to faith and church involvement, the list of questions grows: How is this relevant? What difference does it make? Is it true for me?

Those of us who’ve entered into adulthood know, to some degree that these are always good questions to ask. But we often fail to engage them with the same intensity as our youth. It’s fun to imagine what a congregation would look like if everyone in it experienced something of this formational energy—if, at our growing edges, we never stopped asking the questions that frequent the minds of our youth. Churches that find ways to give voice to and connect with their youth in this way experience the dynamic gift of their perspective.

**Roslyn Hogan, Minister to Students, University Christian Church, Austin, Texas**

The young adults I do ministry with bring a variety of gifts to the church, and one gift that really stands out for me is the gift of passion. College students are passionate about theological study, creative worship, and enacting social justice. To begin with, college students have a strong desire to engage in theological study. During my time as campus minister I have led our students in a variety of studies, most of which they selected. We studied world religions, poverty and outreach, the Saving Jesus series, and the Living the Questions series. We also have Bible studies that include an examination of social and historical context and translation issues. The students approach learning with enthusiasm. They truly desire to widen their worldview and their understanding of being church through serious theological study.

Also, young adults are passionate about being creative in worship. They respect traditional styles of worship, and they reinterpret symbols and rituals to reflect their experiences and their ethnicities. Each spring our church has a worship service that is led by our college students. The students are responsible for every element of the service, including music, preaching, and presiding at Christ’s table. Our young adults creatively weave together traditional, contemporary, and multi-cultural ways of doing worship.

Finally, young people are passionate about enacting social justice. They are courageous about verbally denouncing oppressive behaviors in the church and society, and...
many of our college students have volunteered with Christian and secular organizations that seek to empower marginalized peoples. In short, the majority of young adults I do ministry with have a burning desire to change the world.

**Are young people, in your experience, leaving the church?**

**Roslyn Hogan**

Campus ministry looks much different in our congregation than it did sixty years ago. There was a time when the number of student members was far greater than it is today. I think most mainline Protestant ministries would report similar changes. Lower numbers of young people may be attributed to various changes within society, including increased mobility.

There are fewer numbers of young people in most mainline Protestant churches, yet there are still young adults out there hungering for meaning, and many look to the church for direction. My concern is that in some ways the church is failing to take young people seriously as they search for meaning. While in seminary, I was sometimes confronted with the attitude that young people and lay people in general cannot handle serious theological study. My ministry with college students is teaching me otherwise. I find that young adults often feel that the faith of their childhood is lacking in theological depth and insight. They need their faith to grow with them as many college students are facing serious life issues, such as discerning their vocations, difficult breakups with significant others, the death of loved ones, and financial hardships.

Young people long to ask theological questions. They desire to know where they come from: who God in Christ is and the church’s history and traditions. They hope to find joy and healing through thoughtful worship and service in Christ’s name. Young people continue to need the church’s love, guidance, and support. It is therefore imperative that we empower young people with a solid theological education that will help them make sense of the world around them.

**Ben Johnston-Krase**

I once asked an auditorium full of high school students if they thought their lives were over scheduled. En masse, they responded with a resounding “yes.” In conversations with youth, I’ve found this to be true again and again—increased demands on time from school and extracurricular activities, increased pressure to excel in multiple areas, and increased expectations that a “successful” youth is a busy one. With this in mind, I would suggest that our youth are not actively leaving the church; rather, the church is finding itself an expendable element in an overly tight schedule. We might wonder why Sunday worship services and youth meetings are more easily jettisoned than, say, a teen’s second or third extracurricular activity.

The truth is that there are plenty of places where our young people are not leaving the church. These are places where congregations and those who minister directly with youth recognize that our youth don’t need one more thing to do. Rather, they want and need to engage in experiences that help them sense God’s presence, form meaningful relationships with others, hear God’s call in their lives, and respond to that call purposefully. A colleague in ministry reminds me from time to time that our youth aren’t the future of the church; they are the church. And as the church, they are called like the rest of us—to listen and lead, to learn and teach, to be served and to serve.
How does popular culture challenge or enhance ministry with youth?

BEN JOHNSTON-KRASE

I think that popular culture challenges our ministry with youth when we fail to see it for what it is: the pervasive cultural backdrop of their life experience (and ours too). We can’t treat pop culture like a magazine subscription and expect our youth to simply cancel it in favor of an alternative reality. We can, however, help our youth identify elements of the popular culture that either resonate or fail to resonate with God’s hope for the world. When we do this well, we begin to find ways that popular culture can actually enhance ministry with youth.

An exciting challenge in youth ministry exists in helping our young people decode popular cultural messages. For example, what does the popular culture say about beauty? Love? Success? As our youth become careful, fluent connoisseurs of their own popular culture, they hopefully learn to distinguish truth from untruth in the messages that come their way daily.

ROSILYN HOGAN

Popular culture does both. I understand myself as a part of this world, yet I am not captive to its values, and I hope my ministry reflects this. I often think of the Apostle Paul’s message in 1 Corinthians: 9 and his statement in verse 22, “I have become all things to all people that I might by all means save some.” The church can use popular culture to help communicate the Gospel without watering the Gospel down.

There are many ways to answer this question, but I will lift up one way popular culture can enhance ministry. The use of films in a church setting can be an excellent way to emphasize issues we face as world citizens and members of Christ’s body. For example, in the fall of 2006 our college group and youth group watched An Inconvenient Truth as part of an event sponsored by Texas Interfaith Power and Light. We were able to tie scripture and theology to the issues presented in the film. Overall, the students learned new things and they seemed to feel this was a worthwhile activity.

Popular culture also presents many challenges to ministry. A challenge I often find myself working against is careless consumerism. The culture puts forth the idea that we are the technology we possess, the clothes we wear, the cars we drive, and so on. The emphasis is on the material world and how much of it we can consume, whether we truly require certain things or not, while the majority of the world’s people are struggling to meet their basic needs. I try to encourage the students through worship and study to recognize our interconnectedness with others and to think about what we consume, why we consume it, and how our choices affect the world and Christ’s body. The students asked to spend two semesters studying poverty and doing outreach, and one of the results of this study is that most of our young adults understand that our faith is inextricably tied to our choices in the marketplace. Popular culture can help or hinder ministry, and when viewed creatively, even the more challenging elements can bring us to a deeper understanding of who we are and Whose we are.
LIBERAL THEOLOGY: A RADICAL VISION

For the past half-century, liberal theology—a movement in church and academy often associated with Friedrich Schleiermacher—has been criticized as selling out to modernity, lampooned for domestica
ing God, and caricatured for its alleged insistence that the human person lies at the center of Christian faith. Given this history, when a book appears in print that loudly proclaims itself as “liberal,” pastors and theologians are likely to take notice. Written by one of North America’s leading theologians, this trim and accessible book effectively rebuts the caricatures that have accumulated surrounding the liberal project by offering an attractive vision for the future of Christian theology in a world torn by religious fundamentalism on the one hand and secular materialism on the other. The book is divided into three brief chapters: one that outlines the liberal vision amid other contemporary theological approaches; a second that explores how a liberal approach to theology helps Christians grapple with controversial themes; and, a third that connects liberal theology to movements for freedom.

Chapter one offers an argument for why liberal theology is needed in our day. The very word “liberal,” Hodgson notes, stems from the Latin word for freedom. Liberal theology is inherently radical, in that it drives us to the roots (radix) of theology: “God’s radical freedom, nature’s incipient freedom, and humanity’s liberated freedom” (ix). These three topics—the divine, the cosmic, and the human—form a matrix in which God’s freedom project can be glimpsed amid the ambiguities and tragedies of our age. Drawing on the legacy of Barth and Hegel, Hodgson is careful to ground our understanding of freedom in God’s life, the “God who is freedom and who gives freedom or sets free.” To think theology liberally, in this sense, is to be “fitted for freedom” (10-11). Whereas modernity tends to define freedom negatively (freedom from something or someone else), liberal theology configures it positively. To be free is to be for another, liberal toward another, open to another. The freedom that liberal theology speaks invites us to open ourselves “to whatever presents itself or reveals itself,” whether in Scripture, tradition, or the whole of human experience in light of God’s freedom (14). Hodgson then identifies five other marks, in addition to freedom, that characterize a consistently liberal approach to theology: a critically constructive bent, a recognition of the importance of experience, its visionary spirit, its stress on cultural transformation, and its insistence on mediating theological truth. On this final point, Hodgson notes that because God alone is the one truth and source of freedom, every “finite truth and finite practice of freedom is relative and incomplete” (22). This recognition enables theology to resist the fundamentalist idolatry of insisting that one’s understanding of truth is absolute and the nihilist alternative of denying truth’s existence. To be liberal is to live into truth, in the concrete, yet ever incomplete, practices of freedom that we encounter in the world by grace.

Chapter two turns to several contested topics in Christian theology specifically and human life more generally. Here the reflections on tragedy and redemption are particularly powerful. Reconciliation, which Christians glimpse in the life of Christ, addresses suffering and tragedy not by ignoring them or moving beyond them. Rather, in the cross, tragedy is confronted and incorporated into the divine life: the crucifixion is not simply a human tragedy, but a divine tragedy, indicating that “God suffers death yet overcomes death” and brings “infinite love out of infinite anguish” (51). Hodgson’s reliance on Hegel here will prove difficult for some readers, as this chapter is the most technical of the three. Yet beneath
Joseph J. Ellis’ American Creation: Triumphs and Tragedies at the Founding of the Republic offers an insightful and sobering account of the shaping of America. American Creation moves beyond a cursory account of historical events and glorified presentations of the brilliance of major historical political figures. Rather, Ellis’ reading of the founding moments of the American Republic captures the deep intellectual, emotional, and social complexities involved in this great political experiment. The work highlights seven decisive episodes in the embryonic stages of the American story that helped to characterize the country’s identity: 1) a successful war for colonial independence; 2) the establishment of the first nation-sized republic; 3) the creation of a wholly secular state; 4) the creation of overlapping and multiple sources of authority that blurred the jurisdiction between state and federal power; 5) the creation of political parties that fostered ongoing dialogue between divergent voices; 6) policies of “Indian removal” that enabled American settlements west of the Mississippi River; and, 7) the Louisiana Purchase from France. Each of these episodes serve, for Ellis, as historical vehicles through which he navigates and explores the minds and motivations of America’s political icons.

In the end, this rich little book offers not a summation of liberal theology, but an invitation to take part in the practice of freedom, “God’s saving presence in the world” (97). This reviewer hopes that many will heed this call, even as Hodgson nears the end of his theological career.
logical spirit of human freedom is especially provocative. How Jefferson negotiates the clash of these warring realities is best evidenced in the book’s final chapter where Ellis analyzes the “triumphs and tragedies” associated with America’s purchase of the Louisiana Territory from France.

“At less than four cents an acre, the Purchase became the most lucrative real estate transaction in American history” (207-208). But the transaction proved not only financially lucrative. Politically, historians understand the Purchase to be the most significant executive decision in American history. Ellis explains however, the unease that haunted Jefferson as he struggles to reconcile the tactical need to exercise unilateral executive power in securing the territory from France with his central belief that “any energetic projection of executive power was a monarchical act.” Strategically, the Louisiana Purchase quashed all British and French imperial ambitions in North America, establishing America as, what Jefferson called, the “empire of liberty.”

According to Ellis, Jefferson’s fear that his unilateral projection of executive power in the purchase of the Louisiana Territory went against the spirit of the American republican enterprise was only outweighed by his fear that his actions would set a constitutional precedent for federal sovereignty over the territories, to include the question of slavery. The Louisiana Purchase presented the federal government with a series of management questions that ranged from boundary issues to citizenship analysis. But, argues Ellis, the two most critical and pressing questions sparked by the Purchase were: 1) what opportunities did the Louisiana Purchase present to put slavery in the United States on the road to extinction? and 2) why was Jefferson incapable of seizing those opportunities?

These are largely questions about Jefferson’s basic convictions and how these convictions governed his discernment process regarding the institution of slavery and its place in the American experiment at self-government. Two basic, self-evident truths functioned as the boundary conditions that framed Jefferson’s political imagination when deliberating the extension of slavery into the Louisiana Territory. One, Jefferson rejected the possibility that a black and white population could exist peacefully in a state of equality. Two, Jefferson held the belief that slavery defied resolution and any effort to do so would lead to a very bloody civil war (239-240).

Jefferson knew that the institution of slavery made the United States, the “empire of liberty,” appear inherently hypocritical and morally empty. Thus, he felt a desperate need to abolish its practice. Ellis maintains that the Louisiana Purchase provided an opportunity, and perhaps the last realistic opportunity, for the United States to implement a policy of “gradual emancipation.” But, for this to occur, two federal policies had to be set in place: 1) slavery in the Louisiana Territory must be prohibited and abolition made a condition for admission into the union; and 2) a portion of the revenues secured from the sale of western land must be allocated to the compensation of slave owners who would free their slaves on an agreed upon schedule. Although slavery would end, many freed slaves would more than likely remain as underpaid and exploited hired labor (235). Therefore, the economic variable associated with the ending of slavery would be factored out of the equation. These policies were not pursued by Jefferson because, argues Ellis, with the convictions that governed Jefferson’s discernment process, the outer limits of his political imagination were defined by racial complexities and not the possibility to extend the spirit of freedom to all participants in the great American experiment.

For instance, consider Jefferson’s position in writings where he responds to the Missouri Question in 1819 when Missouri became the first territory acquired in the Purchase to petition for statehood. Jefferson maintained that the issue should be allowed to pass “like waves in a storm under the ship” (236). But, as the debate grew stronger in Congress, Jefferson sharpened his position. He warned that the issue of slavery would eventually end in “a war of extermination toward the African in our land” (236). What we cannot argue, notes Ellis, is that Jefferson felt constitutionally bound not to exert executive authority on the promotion or prohibition of slavery into the Louisiana Territory because he exercised that exact authority in the purchase itself. Jefferson fully believed in the impossibility of a flourish-
ing United States where an emancipated African people existed in freedom alongside former slave-owners. Therefore, he maintained that the elimination of slavery from the United States was not a reasonable nor viable goal without a removal of the freed black population back to Africa or some location in the Caribbean. Hence, Jefferson advocated a policy of emancipation and expatriation. He held two irreconcilable views that in his mind proved an insoluble dilemma where “justice is on one scale and self-preservation the other” (237). The American union could not be preserved if the country sought to exercise justice toward the enslaved African people.

Ellis’ most intriguing and, in my opinion, valuable contribution to the reader’s understanding about the “American creation” is the subtle but sharp distinction he draws between Jefferson’s concern about the institution of slavery and his fear about the public discussion of slavery. Ellis rightly observes that it was not the issue of slavery that functioned as Jefferson’s “fireball in the night.” Instead, it was the discussion, the public debate about slavery, that awakened Jefferson in the night and filled him with terror (236). The public debate about slavery represented a reflective act. That is, it awakened in the American conscious the idea that the institution of slavery was not absolute for either the enslaved or the slave owners. And this consciousness, Jefferson fully believed, would ultimately lead to the dismemberment of the union (237). The discussion about the institution of slavery, not the institution of slavery itself, posed the greatest threat to dismantling the work to which Jefferson had devoted his life. In the end, *American Creation* concludes that Jefferson’s failure in 1803 to assume leadership on the issue of slavery in the territories was not an inadvertent act of negligence, but rather a conscious decision to avoid placing the nation on a road that he firmly believed would lead to its demise (237). And so, in 1803, Jefferson exacted a personal code of silence on the issue of slavery and wished to extend that silence over the entire nation.

Finally, *American Creation* reminds contemporary American citizens to visit and revisit the historical political shaping of our nation. With our critical look at the past we recognize, as Ellis maintains, that the political framing of our nation was a human creation, and flawed—as all human creations must be, especially in its prevailing racial prejudices (243). Our contemporary world is not so different from the founding years of our nation. Public conversations about slavery and racial injustice are uncomfortable and often force us into an eerie silence or muddled speech. Yet, the challenges of racial injustice still confront the American public. Ellis encourages us to engage the issue of race and the remnants of the continuing cultural conflict that still blights our national character. As he analyzes the struggle of Jefferson with the contradiction of slavery in a nation whose founding values were based on eloquent pronouncements of equality and justice, Ellis subtly reveals the roots of contemporary issues of racism and the source of present day reluctance to engage in open public dialogue and debate about the lingering weight of slavery that continues to haunt our national creed.

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One of the fascinating particulars of any culture is the way that bodily gestures are understood. Gestures seem to be a cross-cultural trait that take a particular meaning from their embeddedness in a culture. The blink of an eye, for example, is an involuntary response to certain stimuli, but as a communicative gesture, a wink is also learned behavior. An anthropologist could give a fascinating lecture on the different meanings of “winking the eye,” very few of which would be related to the involuntary response of blinking. But how would an anthropologist learn what a wink means? If we answer “research and field work,” we would be technically correct. If we say “observation” and “experience” we would be pragmatically correct. Observation alone may not be sufficient for understanding. Like so many things, it is also a matter

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of experience.

I have been thinking a little about this matter in light of my own recent experience. From my childhood I am familiar with a gesture that my mother didn’t like and my father never used, as far as I know. Nevertheless, I am familiar with it from repeated observation and experience. It is the extension of the middle finger, typically the longest digit on a human hand. I have heard it called “shooting the bird,” “flipping someone off,” “giving the finger,” and “half a peace sign.” Given the congestion of Austin traffic, I have observed a considerable number of extended middle fingers. Truthfully, I have been both the recipient and the giver of this gesture. Sometimes the gesture (from others, of course) is supplemented with words, some of which are neither repeatable nor printable. Imagine trying to explain to someone from a different culture with a rudimentary grasp of English what “giving the finger” means. Our terminology for it is idiomatic and the gesture itself is opaque. One needs to experience the gesture in context, although I wouldn’t recommend an Austin traffic jam as a palatable educational exercise.

In June 2006 I had the privilege of visiting a Daoist temple and monastery outside of Qingdao, China, a sacred area in a gorgeous mountain setting just a few hundred yards from the seashore. During the horrible excesses of the so-called “Cultural Revolution,” religion in China was officially derided and banned. Now public expressions of religion are more acceptable in China and there is curiosity and sometimes even openness there about the peculiarly human, cross-cultural trait of religious expression. I visited the recently (re)opened Daoist temple and monastery along with hundreds of Asian people, some of whom were curious and some of whom were practitioners of Daoism.

Imagine my delight and surprise at the sight of a colorfully dressed sculpted figure in a glass case at the temple of heavenly tablets and the gods of wealth. He was not located in the open room of the temple, but was apparently a supporting figure representing the divine world. His left hand was extended toward the glass and those who view him. And extending upright from his closed hand is his middle finger! Now, if I had just been cut off in congested traffic, then I would know what it meant, but the finger in the context of heaven and wealth seems to mean the opposite. I was just a couple steps from the central room of the temple, where people were acting reverently and burning joss sticks.

To this day I do not know what “giving the finger” means in Daoism. I asked a couple of Chinese friends, neither of whom were Daoists, and they didn’t know. The gesture and its significance, however, has given me some food for thought. If I were serious about the matter of Daoism and “giving the finger,” I would be wise not to settle for a quick explanation. At a basic level I can say that “giving the finger” is a Chinese gesture, historically speaking, and be done with it, but I am not likely to make much headway in understanding it, unless I experience it in the context of related Daoist practices.

Missiologist Lesslie Newbigin has noted that the Christian story is neither predominantly western nor predominantly Eastern. As gospel and culture are inseparable, the Christian story finds a home throughout the world: “True contextualization accords
to the gospel its rightful primacy, its power to penetrate every culture and to speak within each culture, in its own speech and symbol, the word which is both No and Yes, both judgment and grace.”¹ It seems to me that some traditional Christian gestures are also opaque or dense for those who come new to the faith, i.e., adults without prior involvement or children coming to grips with practices that their parents believe are important. Take, for example, the sprinkling or immersing of a person in water, along with the performative words “I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” Who can unpack the now unfamiliar word “baptism,” the mysteries of the triune God in human formula, or the odd word “holy” with “spirit,” in our Judeo-Christian culture, much less for an inquisitive eastern Daoist?

Well, we can and we must.

The sacrament (gesture and words) joins us to Jesus Christ and his transcultural, transgenerational family. That is of inestimable value for anyone, Daoist or otherwise. Perhaps it is the case that an explanation cannot be done better by still more words or different words to accompany the gesture of baptism itself. After all, who are we to change either deed or word of what has been a primary identity marker in Christian communities? Perhaps the better “explanation” is the experience of the particular culture (community) that draws its identity from the gesture and interprets baptism for practitioners with yet other identity-marking deeds and words? When John the Baptist was asked about his efforts, he pointed to Jesus, whom he called the “lamb of God.” That piqued the interest of some, given the activities of baptizing in the Jordan, talk about the Holy Spirit, and taking away the sin of the world (John 1:29-39). How about those topics for conversation starters? When they approached Jesus about where he was staying and furthering the conversation, he simply replied: “Come and see” (1:39).

NOTE


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