

Australian Gen-Y Spirituality

The Spirit of the *Me*-Generation

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Abstract

This article represents a summary-discussion of research undertaken by The Salvation Army, Australia Eastern Territory, into Gen-Y spirituality in Australia, over the months December 2009-April 2010. The research sought to (1) listen to the voices of Gen-Y individuals and groups to hear what they have to say about themselves and their spiritual journeys; (2) come to a deeper understanding of Gen-Y life-experiences and those factors which have contributed to their increasing openness to spirituality but their increasing cynicism towards religion; & (3) identify possible areas to develop a nation-wide strategy to increase "connectedness" with a cynical but nevertheless curious Gen-Y generation.

Introduction

Over recent years significant attention has been paid by the media, government departments and non-government social and community agencies (university researchers and youth networks in particular) to issues affecting Australia's youth. Researchers in the social, psychological, medical and health-care fields have paid attention to youth drug and alcohol addiction rates, psychological well-being, depression and suicide rates, education and employment rates, as well as sexual health, orientation and well-being. Co-incident with those studies, but largely independent of them, has been the emergence of a number of studies on Australian youth spirituality. This article augments those larger studies by providing a summary report from one particular study undertaken by the Salvation Army (hereafter referred to as TSA) in late 2009 and early 2010 on the topic of Australian youth spirituality. The findings of this primary research will be of interest to a variety of professions, agencies and community-groups in Australian society, not the least of which are schools, parent-groups, the teaching profession, local churches, community leaders, but also to government,

community and health practitioners with a particular focus on contributing to youth well-being in Australian society.

The Reasons for the Study

In late 2009 The Salvation Army, Australia Eastern Territory commissioned a piece of research on Australian youth spirituality, focused particularly on Gen-Y youth aged between 15 and 27 years. Three primary reasons lay behind TSA's interest in commissioning the research. The first was the observation, much discussed among church leaders, that Gen-Y represents the most identifiable "missing generation" from the ranks of the Australian church. Questions which lay behind the research were, "How might the Australian church build a stronger cultural and generational connection with Gen-Y?" and "What deep longings does Gen-Y possess which might be addressed by the Christian gospel?" The second was an observation concerning the general re-enchantment going on in Australian society, and the reawakening to 'spirit' in our culture as exemplified by the BodyMindSpirit events held throughout the country. Questions which arose with particular regard to Gen-Y's interest in spirituality such as, "Does Gen-Y understand itself to be a spiritual generation?" and, "How do Gen-Y individuals and groups define 'spirituality'?" Some of the available literature addresses these questions, but there is a noticeable lack of accessible information which directly and answers the core interests of people seeking to minister to Gen-Y from a Christian point of view. The third was a deep concern for the inter-generational transmission of the Christian faith from the current generation of leaders and adherents who currently make up Christian communities, to the rising generation who will make up tomorrow's church. Questions such as, "What form/s will tomorrow's church take, given the changing conditions which affect today's cultural context?" and "What mission strategies are available to us as we engage Gen-Y with the call of Jesus' gospel to "Come, follow me!"

The Shape of the Research

A research project was designed which sought to elicit a series of responses from Gen-Y youth in answer to a set of guiding questions. The research was comprised of two activities aimed at eliciting responses concerning their spiritual self-understandings of Gen-Y individuals and groups. The first activity was a walk-up survey addressed in the Sydney CBD by TSA volunteers taken amidst the pre-Christmas crowd in the 5-7 pm peak-period transition between working and

leisure hours. 109 responses were obtained from the survey which asked questions such as: (1) do you see yourself as a spiritual person? (2) do you talk about spiritual things when you are with your friends?; (3) how do you define spirituality? (4) what spiritual activities have you engaged in over the past month, e.g. prayer, meditation, worship activities?; (5) are you content, mostly content, or discontent with your own personal spiritual journey? The second activity was a series of four focus groups conducted by the author of this summary report (two conducted amongst Christian church youth groups), and two conducted amongst junior military personnel who were decidedly non-Christian and even anti-religious). Approximately 10 people made up each focus group, so a total of 40 individuals contributed to the focus groups. In the context of an open discussion forum, questions such as: (1) what are the characteristics of Gen-Y? (2) Gen-Y is a generation of spiritual seekers [true/false]? (3) how would you define spirituality? (4) what kind of spirituality is Gen-Y looking for? (5) where do you go to have your deepest hopes and fears met? (6) does Christianity have anything to offer Gen-Y? The four focus groups generated a total of 100+ pages of transcribed responses.

Limitations, Strengths and Possibilities of the Research

As with all forms of research the limitations to the research need to be identified and acknowledged. In the case of this present research, gender participation was skewed slightly in favour of males over females, with more females (53%) than males (47%) contributing to the walk-up interviews (total of 109), and significantly more males (ca. 65%) than females (ca. 35%) contributed to the focus group interviews (40 participants). Further, this research did not look for but nonetheless found high levels of multicultural participation. In addition to white Australian contributors who made up 60% of the focus group numbers, the remaining 40% were comprised of Gen-Y youth from Chinese, Indian, New Zealand and Sri Lankan backgrounds. No questions concerning ethnicity were posed in the walk-up interviews. Regrettably, no Aboriginal participants took part in the research.

The strengths of the research are thought to be the coincidence between the goal of the research, which was to obtain first-hand responses from Gen-Y individuals and groups concerning their self-understandings *apropos* the personal, social and religious category known as 'spiritual'; and the possibility of The Salvation Army

preparing a process aimed at addressing Gen-Y's stated lack (or otherwise) in their spiritual experience. Further, Mark McCrindle of McCrindle Research was invited to undertake data analysis responses generated by the walk-up interviews and focus group responses. Mark has significant experience in researching a Australian generations, particularly Gen-Y. His whitepaper entitled 'Emerging Trends, Enduring Truth: the Spiritual Attitude of the New Generations'¹ is an example to his contribution to the area. Some of the material in the 'Findings' section below is taken from the McCrindle data analysis and report to TSA.

The possibilities which these report findings represent are manifold. For reasons of brevity I will select only two. The first is that -- like the apostle Paul -- today's Christian church is under obligation to Christ and the gospel, to exercise its pastoral and missional responsibilities by effectively communicating the good news of salvation and the coming of Christ's kingdom to the rising generation. As contained in the documents of the Roman Catholic Vatican II:

In every age, the church carries the responsibility of reading the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel, if it is to carry out its task. In language intelligible to every generation, it should be able to answer the ever-recurring questions which people ask about the meaning of this present life and of the life to come, and how one is related to the other. *We must be aware of and understand the aspirations, the yearnings, and the often dramatic features of the world in which we live.*²

The second is that the much discussed re-enchanting of society and the re-awakening to spirit presently unfolding in our dischordant post-Christian *and* post-secular consciousness, has led to a new situation where -- at some deep level -- the very longings which Gen-Y identify with in their inner psyches intersects with the Christian message of hope, reconciliation, deep-level relatedness, and personal/cosmic renewal. That does not mean however, that -- as some Christian pundits suspected of post-modernism -- God will ensure that a new openness to Christian truth and spiritual experience will arrive without

¹ McCrindle Research White Paper, www.McCrindle.com.au (accessed April 20, 2010)

² The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gadium et Specs.*, para 4. Austin Flannery OPS, 'Vatican Council II: constitutions, decrees, declarations, 6th printing, Dominican Publications, Dublin Ireland, 2007. My italics.

necessitating any action or discomfort on the part of the Christian Church. Far from it. As you will understand from the sections below, Gen-Y's understanding of spirituality is far from a biblically-derived understanding, and calls for active engagement on the part of Christian leaders, teachers and evangelists to guide some of the misconceptions, misunderstandings, and wrong appropriations of the Christian message held by Australian Gen-Y.

Meet Gen-Y

In this research it was important to hear the 'voice' of Gen-Y. Here are some of the pertinent statements made in the course of this research:

- we're idealistic! We expect an awful lot
- we're like very *now*. We want everything instantly, and we live for the moment
- we desperately want to be needed, but suspect we might not be
- we don't like being told what to think or how to act
- if you don't know the answer to something, you just Google it
- we're more open to ideas and things, but less likely to commit
- I never really express my deepest inner feelings; I'm afraid of getting hurt
- we share the most outrageous stuff about ourselves -- on Facebook
- somehow, when my life is going okay -- the rest of the world is okay. Am I 'me' focussed?
- we don't pick things up quickly -- everything has to be carefully explained

Thanks to a number of significant publications in the area of Gen-Y spirituality,³ we now have a profile of Gen-Y youth in Australia. The following general themes are pertinent to Gen-Y;

1. ***they feel empowered yet uncertain:*** Young Australians aged 18 to 30 are extending adolescence and deferring adulthood, usually signified by milestones such as marriage, children and mortgage. About half of them still live at home with their parents until well into their 20s.

³ E.g. Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton & Ruth Webber. *The Spirit of Generation Y: young peoples' spirituality in a changing Australia*. Mulgrave: John Garrett, 2007; Kath Engebretson. *Connecting Teenage Boys: spirituality and religious education*. Strathfield: St Paul's Publications, 2007; & Philip Hughes. *Putting Life Together: findings from Australian youth spirituality research*. Nunawading: Fairfield Press/Christian Research Association, 2007

2. **they seek a life balance but not a bank balance:** their employment patterns indicate that they value a life-work balance. As well as working to earn money for leisure activities and buying consumer goods -- there is also a sense of equity, justice and mutual concern for the earth, the poor and the marginalised
3. **they are social yet lonely:** Gen-Y is technologically connected like no other generation before them through the internet, e-mail and SMS. But they nevertheless feel a sense of social isolation and dislocation.
4. **they are searching from more:** Gen-Y are sceptical about their parents' consumerism and materialistic values. They value community and the 'depth' dimensions of life -- something not easily found in an outwardly-focused society.
5. **they are spiritual not religious:** "I'm a spiritual person, but I'm not religious," is a repeated refrain, and represents something of Gen-Y's scepticism towards religious institutions and their misuse of power, searching instead for spirituality, passion, intuition and 'connectedness'.
6. **they are sceptical yet hopeful:** despite the brooding realities of the global financial downturn, international terrorism, the unravelling of Western culture, and the greed of Western consumerism, Gen-Y holds out hope for a better world, based on expectations which focus on ecological, social, justice concerns and equity for all.

Spirituality and Gen-Y

Further statements gleaned from Gen-Y participants themselves about how understand spirituality, themselves and their world follow:

- I define spirituality as the quest for meaning, something ultimate in life
- spirituality is something that, when you find it, changes the way you live
- there is a feeling that truth may not exist
- I'm a Christian; I link spirituality to God and being in a relationship with him
- the longer I'm a Christian and the longer I'm with Christians the more I see it (Christianity) as just another religion!
- I don't think Gen-Y are spiritual seekers -- seeking takes too much energy; they can't be bothered
- some of my Christian friends aren't seekers, they're more acceptors; they accept whatever their leaders tell them

- there's a sense that I believe what I believe and you believe what you believe, and that's cool. This is my truth and that's your truth.
- only as a last resort would most people go to Church [for help with their spiritual lives]
- yes, Christianity does have something to offer, but there's something missing in the *offer* part. The Church doesn't seem to be aware of how to offer Christianity to young people in the C21st, there's loads of potential in Christianity but it's just not realised because the church is just not with the times and doesn't offer an invitation to faith that is relevant and matched up with my experience and needs.

Given those first-hand responses, what can we say about Gen-Y and spirituality?

1. **they make great sceptics:** the researcher of Gen-X, Tom Beaudoin, said that Gen-X make great "heretics"; ⁴ I would suggest that Gen-Y make great sceptics. That is, no statement is taken at its face value because of the never-ending, unfolding streaming of virtual reality with its competing truth claims. But they are also inherently curious.
2. **there's got to be something 'there':** behind the competitive, relativistic "tournament of competing visions,"⁵ the overall sense is that there has to be something real behind the confused fabric. They might be sceptics, but they are not cynics -- if God, hope, salvation, healing and holders were somewhere there "on the other side" they would reach to grasp it.
3. **they are spiritual but not religious:** many have said "I am spiritual but not religious," meaning that religion (understood as institution, power centre and unreasonable demand) contributes nothing positive to their own life-experience; whereas spirituality (understood as an innate quality of the human person) is conceived of as contributing something essential to their inner lives.
4. **they are searching but cautious:** McCrindle's statement that "Gen-Y is the most educated, entertained and into our generation industry's history, yet they live in a culture without law and transcendence"⁶ -- signals that

⁴ Tom Beaudoin. *Virtual Faith: the irreverent spiritual quest of Generation X*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998, 41

⁵ Barry Harvey. 'What we've got here is a Failure of Imagination: the Church-based University in the Tournament of Competing Visions', *Christian Scholars' Review* Vol XXIV, Number 2, (Winter) 2005.

⁶ McCrindle White Paper, p. 8

their scientific education, the consumer economy, and their experience of broken relationships and broken trust have predisposed them towards caution. Nevertheless, they are still looking for something "more".

5. ***they want to take the journey together:*** ministry options which might have worked in the past, e.g. apologetics, preaching and hierarchical structures, are likely to be seen as unwelcome argumentation, indoctrination and presumption by Gen-Y 'readers'. What they want is someone to be a "Jesus figure" to take the journey with them, to understand and to give them encouragement, inspiration and even 'absolution' when they need it.
6. ***they want to be relational and real:*** what they're looking for is a form of spiritual life which is relational and real. This possibility lies within the scope of Christian spirituality, given the fact that Christianity is an ancient spiritual pathway based on the wisdom teachings of Jesus. Small-group ministries which function as 'open' communities inclusive of a range of ethnicities and 'differentness', have the potential to impact those Gen-Y individuals and relational networks which acknowledge themselves to be spiritual 'seekers'.

Findings

In summary form, this research produced a series of 'findings' related to the spirituality of Gen-Y. These findings will be of relevance to our understanding of the spirituality of Gen-Y, and have import for the kinds of understandings and approaches to ministry required of those Christians who seek to minister to them.

- 1) ***Spiritual or non-spiritual?*** In the interviews, 64% described themselves as being spiritual. Only 7% said they were definitely not a spiritual person. Two thirds (66%) said they talk about spiritual things with their friends. 13% talk about spiritual things regularly. Although they are not well-enmeshed with the Australian church, nevertheless 76% of those interviewed had attended a church within the last year, which shows that the majority of young people are still open to being influenced by the Christian faith, especially at the key 'rites of passage' such as births, deaths and marriages.

- 2) ***How is spirituality defined?*** A smaller number of references were made to belief in a high monotheistic God, but those references were not without problems, e.g. "If God exists, he wouldn't let kids die, or let world poverty happen. He wouldn't let all the bad stuff that's happening happen." The larger number of references to spirituality were self-referential, e.g. "Spirituality is being connected with yourself but has nothing to do with religion"; "and other sentiments which relate to the quality of the inner life of the human person, "Self belief," "Self-awareness," "Self contentment." Spirituality, then, is not something automatically connected to a transcendent reality, but a self-reality.
- 3) ***Attitudes towards Christianity:*** Gen-Y's attitudes towards Christianity are largely negative. "You're just talking to me because you want to convert me and take my money," and "Why would I want to join up with the church when I could be sleeping with my girlfriend or boyfriend, I could be getting [drunk] every weekend having the best time of my life. Why would I want to come to your services on Sunday, sing four songs, listen to a guy preach, when I could be at *my* church [the pub]. ... I don't want to be told I'm a sinner going to hell." Gen-Y has picked up the vibe - - rightly or wrongly -- that Christianity is a tired old religion that has nothing much to offer.
- 4) ***The gospel Gen-Y will respond to:*** when asked what kind of gospel Gen-Y want to hear, the predominant response was something directly related to their lives, something which was good news in a bad news world, something which was invitational and adventurous rather than imposed and legalistic, something which has the potential to make a positive contribution to their lives, to capture their imaginations and to offer hope and healing to broken people living in a broken world. The sense of "lostness" and "disconnect-edness" pervaded the focus group interviews; but they were also coloured by black humour, pessimism intermingled with optimism, and a real desire for personal and cultural change. Accompanying these desires for change was the stipulation that it be on their terms.
- 5) ***The way forward:*** it is difficult for Gen-Y to respond positively to the Christian gospel when their interpretation of the gospel is mediated through the turpentine lenses of their empirical education, their materialist culture, their cynical attitudes, and the deregulation of the

religious marketplace so that Christianity is one option amongst many. But then Christian mission has had its challenges in every culture and context -- although ours is more complex, it is not terribly different to all that has gone before. The 7 basic requirements for effective mission to Gen-Y are (1) *proximity*, meaning that we need to get into their space and to communicate with them on their terms; (2) *invitational*, meaning that mission is best undertaken through a discover of something new, as was Jesus' pattern, e.g. "Come and see!" (3) *relational*, meaning that personal relationships and networks are the places and spaces where in-depth meanings are communicated and discovered; (4) *focussed on Jesus*, meaning that Jesus' words, works and wisdom need to be preeminent over religion and church; (5) *call to discipleship*, meaning that -- as with every generation -- Gen-Y need to be confronted with Christ's call to "Come, follow me!"; (6) *educational*, meaning that we can't ask Gen-Y to respond to a gospel they have no knowledge of or are culturally predisposed to misunderstand; & (7) *inductive*, meaning that we need to put in place a model of spiritual training and induction which enables Gen-Y youth to progress through a prescribed pattern of formation, on the journey towards personal and spiritual transformation. Anything less than this will equate to an abandonment on the part of the Christian faith in Australia to the youth and young adults of the nation.

Conclusion

This article has provided an abbreviated report of research undertaken by The Salvation Army, Australia Eastern Territory on youth spirituality focused on Gen-Y in December 2009-April 2010. The research was designed to garner a clearer understanding of youth attitudes towards their life-experiences, spirituality and religion, the church and the Christian faith. The Salvation Army, Australia Eastern Territory is considering its response to the content and findings of this report.