

When left is right

A generational paradox

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What's the question?

THE POSTMODERN GENERATION IN NORTH AMERICA consists of those sandwiched between the heady liberalism and optimism of the post-war Boomers and the lived experience of the failure of the Boomer dream. Who are these people? Are we talking about a homogeneous group? Can we identify a common vision of themselves and the world? Are they shaping a movement in society? Does this reflect or constitute a reactionary trend?

There are a number of questions and presumptions about the young adults who constitute this generation. One common belief is that they represent a turn to reactionary conservatism. We want to explore the truth of this assertion. In order to do so, we will draw upon some of the self-expressions of this group, artistic as well as philosophical. Our hope is that as the diversity of faces in this generation emerges, we will better grasp what the 'turn to the conservative' means to this generation, especially in reference to their spirituality, for it seems that in this arena we confront an inherent paradox. Depending upon the operative understanding of 'conservatism', one may be surprised by what one discovers, especially given this generation's rejection (or at least overt suspicion and mistrust) of institutions in general and of religious institutions in particular. Perhaps the shift to the right has more to do with their relationship with institutional religion and society than with their spirituality in itself. The turn to spirituality, then, emerges as a consequence of the failure of religious institutions to provide meaningful and credible guidance for their spirit.¹

The issue here is not to provide *the* definitive description of this generation or their spirituality. Rather, we want to draw upon the resources available to us in order to challenge some of the prevalent assumptions about young adults and provoke conversation around postmodern creations of meaning and expressions of spirituality. We also hope to suggest some possible functions of the 'turn to the conservative' for this generation.

While rejecting a wholesale move to the right in a traditional sense, we do see a movement or shift to the 'neo-conservative' in all spheres of life, including spirituality, as a minority phenomenon. This neo-conservative turn seems characterized by an integration of Boomer individualism with a rejection of their expansive hedonism. Instead, those neo-conservative young adults seem to embody a fear-based sense of salvation marked by 'hoarder' attitudes in economics and personal relationships. The appropriate motto for this group might be: 'Attain it. Possess it. Protect it for a future time of need.'

Generation X?

This article focuses upon those born between 1961 and 1981, parameters which seem to fit the reality we experience in North America. While one can find substantial agreement on these dates, the characterizations of these persons are as diverse as the individuals who seek to describe them.

Listless, apathetic, pessimistic about the future, a little anti-establishment: that pretty much describes the condition of most people in their late teens and 20s, but it's been applied with a vengeance to the twentysomethings of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Author Douglas Coupland dubbed this group 'Generation X' and as the media pounced on his epithet and wrung it dry, he has come regret it.²

In defence of this generation it could be argued that the twentysomethings in every age are viewed in a similar light by their elders. How then do we establish a credible image of the Xers? Their own self-descriptions prove helpful here.

We are a group of individuals who grew up with no one at home after school. It appears we have little hope for the future. No jobs, no homes, and basically no money are almost expected of us. These bleak prospects, along with the fact that we will be forced to support the largest amount of senior citizens ever, do not provide much hope. Some believe that these blockades will be too much for us to handle and we will for the most part fail at life, but many see our individualism and resourcefulness that have been built up through our childhoods as our saviours. We will soon discover who is right and who is wrong.³

This 'latch-key kid's' identity has given rise to various approaches to this generation. To exemplify the diversity of these understandings let

us look at two. One interpretation is from the world of business. The other comes from the experience and concerns of a pastoral youth minister.

For the business world the latch-key experience has given rise to an understanding of Gen-Xers as possessing these qualities: renewable loyalty, selective focus, creative entrepreneurship, and exceptional attentiveness to feedback.⁴ With a less positive spin, the Xer workforce has been described as mistrustful of institutions, requiring immediacy on all levels of life, independent and having great confidence in their autonomy.⁵ They are resistant to manipulation and any attempt on the part of others to define who they are or can be, especially if such description intends to serve marketing needs. It seems as though the inaccessibility of caregivers in the home has heightened their sensitivity to manipulation by the market – unless it serves *their* purposes.

The perspective of the pastoral youth minister focuses upon the cravings of these young adults to be connected and experience love. They will do anything for a sense of relationship, even though they may find themselves trapped in cycles of sexual permissiveness that only deepen their existential loneliness. Ironically, the very generation that cut its teeth on mass communication is perceived as ‘incapable of knowing how to talk or communicate their feelings’.⁶

These descriptions should not be surprising when one considers that this generation began to enter the world in the midst of the thalidomide scare. Their formative years paralleled the height of the cold war and the advent of AIDS. They grew up watching simulations of nuclear disasters and bearing the brunt of their parents’ failed attempts at intimacy. They have inherited a debt-filled world with little promise of release, whether we are talking about the increasing national debts or the inter-generational sins of their ancestors. The civil institutions of western society have never functioned as intended in their lifetime⁷ and, to quote Douglas Coupland out of context, they have few options beyond ‘low-pay, low-prestige, low-dignity, no future McJobs’.⁸ Some regard this as fate. Others take this as a starting point. In fact, this is the crucible in which their faith life developed and which gives shape to the conservatism towards which some of them have turned.

We need to regard conservatism as it finds its expression in the postmodern generation from two vantage points. The first has to do with what people often refer to as a nostalgia for a golden age of faith that never existed. The second attempts to get beyond the mask of traditional understandings to discover a much more frightening reality:

the manipulation of conservative values in the service of death-dealing ideologies.

Preserving the world that never was

The self-expressions and studies of postmodern adults generally go against the presumption of a so-called 'turn to the right'. A recent article in *America* magazine⁹ bears this out. A survey of 848 persons across the United States established that young adults generally do tend to adhere to the central doctrines of the faith. This may be taken as an essentially conservative stance. However, the same survey also found a desire for change with respect to the role of the laity in general and the role of women, specifically. Furthermore, those questioned exhibited a concern to support social justice initiatives. Clearly, the presumption that Xers would tend to display a radical conservatism finds no substantiation here. In fact, the authors assert that those who regularly attend church services actually tend to be more progressive with respect to justice issues than those who do not. Interestingly enough, it seems that the demythologization of institutions which is so central to the Xer world-view allows them to adhere to the central tenets of faith and celebrate them within the institution while at the same time rejecting undesirable aspects of institutional structure and discipline. Because they have grown up with a reality check vis-à-vis institutions, they do not see this stance as being conflictual or contradictory. Where, then, does the expected religious conservatism come to expression?

Katarina Schuth's study of theological schools¹⁰ provides some assistance. Even though her findings do counter the often-held assumption of a radical conservatism among theology students, they also enlighten the reality of rightist tendencies. In her doctoral work, she found that only 10 per cent of theology students in seminaries come with a 'rigid understanding of their faith'. While they represent a minority of students, they often receive significant support from persons outside the seminary setting who encourage them to challenge any ideas that do not correspond to their preconceived notions of church teaching.¹¹ This means that the strength of their influence is often disproportionate to their number.

Another concern arises when one looks at the number of seminarians (about half) who decide to pursue priestly ministry soon after a conversion experience. Their extended absence from any participation in a regular faith community means that they engage in their formal preparation for ministry with a minimum of practical experience of church life. The consequent 'lack of a match between seminarians'

understanding of the church and the understanding of today's Catholic population'¹² is of no small concern.

This is the arena where the usual expectation of some nostalgic longings finds expression. Seeking to embrace a church from which they have been alienated, ecclesial reality can all too easily be intellectualized or romanticized. Either way, we encounter the most straightforward expression of a nostalgia for a time that never existed, because both reconstructions lack the experiential basis for grounding in reality. This is clearly an experience of *nostos+algia*, the pain of experiencing a separation or alienation from one's sense of home. This nostalgic grasping for what never really existed is amplified not only by those strong, supportive voices external to the seminary experience, but also by the ecclesial structures which sustain a culture that is frequently out of touch with reality. It creates a climate that lends credence and the veneer of authority to what we will come to see not as true conservatism, but as a neo-conservative vision.

Conserving what?

Just as the voices that seek to perpetuate a neo-conservative turn among some seminarians reveal their own ideological agenda, so too the descriptors of Generation X reveal more about the ideologies that are being perpetuated than they do about the generation itself. A larger article could quite engagingly explore the music, film and literature of the Gen-Xers and find compelling evidence both to support and to challenge the dominant ideologies of our time. One need only think of *Trainspotting* or *Flatliners* to see the variety of ideologies at stake in forming an exploitable market, whether it roots itself in the religious, economic or political sphere.

The inherent danger is the imposition of a world-view on a generation in order to perpetuate the interests of others ('our' interests). While we cannot avoid that danger completely, we can minimize it by focusing on a contemporary film that explores the relationship between conservative tradition, faith and spirituality, and sensuality and revelation through the eyes of an Xer at the top of his craft. *Dogma*, written and directed by Kevin Smith, is one such film that expresses the postmodern experience in relation to conservative religion and spirituality.

Kevin Smith is a Roman Catholic who continues to participate actively with his family in his local parish. *Dogma* constitutes his attempt to come to terms with the religion of his childhood, his adult experience of spirituality, and his present relationship with the Church.

Smith describes his movie as 'a love letter to God'. Others, most notably William Donohue, president of the 'Catholic League' (USA), have described the movie in less generous terms. Donohue began a letter-writing campaign to have the movie suppressed after reading a description of it in a Hollywood trade magazine. He has never seen the movie and declined to meet with Smith.¹³

Are there objectionable scenes in *Dogma*? For many conservative or traditionalist Catholics the answer is a resounding yes. Are there moments of real and powerful faith and spiritual challenge in *Dogma*? For many not so conservative Catholics the answer is a resounding yes. What does this dichotomy of response have to teach us about Gen-X spirituality and the assumed turn to conservatism?

The movie mirrors the faith journey of Gen-X Catholics whose lives have seemed to outgrow the religion of their childhood. Therein lies much of its humour and poignancy. Smith takes the same kind of risk with his exploration of Catholicism as Roberto Benigni took with his film, *Life is beautiful*. In *Dogma* Smith explores the very serious questions of faith: the meaning of suffering, the nature of salvation and the limits of dogmatic teaching. He does this through a fusion of theological reflection and earthy, sometimes scatological humour. He concocts a situation where a Catholic church experiencing a decline in membership opts to provide spiritual amnesty (the forgiveness of all one's sins) for those who pass through the archways of a New Jersey church on a specified day. Into this scenario enter two fallen angels who have been banished to Wisconsin for eternity by God. If the angels pass through the arches and are redeemed, God's judgement will be reversed. Since there can be no inconsistency in God, the world will necessarily deconstruct. If the angels pass through the arch without being redeemed, *Dogma* (the solemn pronouncement of a church authority) will fail to wield its expected power (God promised to forgive in heaven those sins forgiven on earth). The fate of the world rests in a woman in a state of spiritual conflict, who receives her commission from a most unangelic angel. She must prevent the fallen angels from entering the church by passing through the arch.

Smith's answers to the various questions of faith sometimes tend towards the magical. When God forgives one of the fallen angels and welcomes him home after sating his blood lust outside the church, all of the dead bodies disappear. The consequences and results of evil are reversed by forgiveness (wishful thinking at best). However, some of Smith's answers are, dare we say, most conservative. His exploration of the meaning of suffering, the full humanity of Christ and the nature of

salvation is quite serious and reflects classic, mainstream Christian theology. The woman sent to stop the fallen angels experiences her own Gethsemane, raging against God and asking for release from this mission. Its intrusion into her life has already brought so much suffering and only promises more to come. The angel appears to her and stands with her in solidarity. He cannot take her suffering away, just as he could not remove the sufferings of Christ. It has fallen to her and will prove to be her pathway to salvation. By extension, it becomes ours as well. Salvation comes, not from release or protection from suffering, but from embracing suffering as a necessary passage in her journey to God. Salvation consists not in the certainty of future security, but in the experience of loving solidarity with God in the present, grounding a trust for a similar future. It is the 'already and not yet' of the reign of God.

In embracing conservative and classical answers to questions of faith and ultimate meaning, *Dogma* has brought the paradox of Gen-X into sharp relief. What appears to be a reactionary turn to the conservative is, in fact, a neo-conservative flight from the experience of God. What appears to be a sacrilegious assault on the authority of the Church is, in fact, a celebration of the conservative understanding of the core religious concerns. The truly conservative spiritual reality in *Dogma* and the experience of many Gen-Xers is found not in the institution or its authoritative teachings, but in the experience of struggling to love God and neighbour with integrity and through service. The reactionary turn to the conservative expected with Gen-X and satirized by Smith, is actually a turn to the neo-conservative. This neo-conservatism is not simply nostalgia for a golden age of faith that never really existed. It is much more dangerous. Neo-conservatism is a new reality that uses the façade of traditional conservative spirituality as a prop to further its agenda of individual salvation rooted in fear and competition. It is salvation at the expense of, to the exclusion of, and on the backs of the morally, economically and socially marginalized. On closer examination we recognize a not-so-subtle heresy that would be terrifying were it not for the countless witnesses to the ultimacy of God's reign, past and present.

The promise of the X

‘Half mast heart’

Confusion, doubt disillusionment and pride,
Not quite sure what’s going on inside,
consistency, commitment you thought you had found
Instead your heart broken pieces on the ground.

Never again, never again you cry,
Determined not to walk again into life’s lie.
Trust is a word which is in the past
The flag of your heart flies at half mast.

Time to heal, time to mend
Soon no longer your heart to defend.
What’s good and noble, upright and true
is busy working its way out of you.
Don’t close up or hold back too tight
Be careful not to blow out the one true light.

Believe in your heart, in what it shows
Hold firm to God’s love while it grows.¹⁴

The promise of the postmodern generation must emerge from the ground of its experience. As their artistic expressions proclaim, salvation can be found only in and through embracing the reality of this generation’s brokenness. One author would claim this to be the cross which marks this generation as ‘X’.¹⁵ We are speaking of a conservative spiritual reality, but certainly not a radical traditionalism.

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NOTES

1 For our purpose spirituality has to do with how an individual or a community experiences and expresses the longings of the human heart, i.e., those promptings that draw us into various relationships, the ‘eros’ that lies within our heart’s core. See Ron Rollheiser, *Holy longing*.

2 Claudia Montague, ‘Don’t call her Gen X’, *Marketing Tools* (Sept/Oct 1994).

- 3 <http://www.coloradocollege.edu/Dept/EC/generationx96/genx/genx9.html>.
- 4 <http://www.rainmakerthinking.com>.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 'What makes Xers different', Newsletter, ed. 2 (February 1996).
- 6 Graeme Cordington, '25 sentences that define a generation', <http://home.pix.za/gc/gc12/papers>.
- 7 Anthony Brancato, 'Generation X: we're older than you think', <http://members.aol.com/jdwillard/info-135.htm>.
- 8 Douglas Coupland, *Generation X: tales for an accelerated culture*, quoted in 'Generation X defined', <http://home.pix.za/gc/gc12/xdefine.htm>.
- 9 Mary Johnson, Dean R. Hoge, William Dinges and Juan L. Gonzales Jr, 'Young adult Catholics: conservative? alienated? suspicious?', *America* (27 March 1999), pp 9–13.
- 10 Reported in Katarina Schuth, 'The state of theological education in seminaries', *America* (5 February 2000), pp 17–22.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Ibid.*, p 22.
- 13 John Brody, 'Mr Smith goes to hell?' *Gentlemen's Quarterly* (November 1999), pp 205–208.
- 14 John Paul (cpfourie@dockside.co.za), 'Half mast heart'.
- 15 Andy Couch, 'A generation of debtors', *Christianity Today* (11 November 1996), p 31.