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INVITING YOUNG ADULTS TO COME OUT RELIGIOUSLY, INSTITUTIONALLY, AND TRADITIONALLY

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Abstract

In recent years, sociologists of religion and research organizations have compiled a picture of the sense and sensibilities of young adults. This article focuses on three major facets of the portrait generated from the research: young adults are (1) spiritual, not religious, (2) anti-institutional, anti-church, and (3) apathetic, if not dismissive, of tradition. The article offers a counterargument, a critical and constructive educational response and correction to each facet of the mosaic. It advocates the re-appropriation of the religious, the institutional, and tradition as indispensable for reopening access to young adults to participate in our social and public spaces.

Today's youth and young adults and people of my (Silent) generation are not, in postmodern rhetoric, radically other, strange, foreign, or alien to one another. We do share a common humanity, but, at the same time, in some ways, we are, in the words of Oliver Brennan, cultures apart (Brennan 2001). Something is lost and something is gained on both sides of this apartness . . . for each generation.

Developmental life-stages can be understood as a never-ending process of loss and gain, of dying and rising. For each generation, something is relinquished, and something hopefully resurrected into new forms of life—if the developmental passages are successfully negotiated (Whitehead and Whitehead 1979).

The thesis of this article is a rather simple one. Its modest claim is: all wisdom is not in the present. He or she who forgets the past forfeits the future. This is a core educational premise and presupposition . . . and needs to be kept in mind in our ministry and education with youth and young adults today. Two educational principles follow from this premise: (1) We must meet (young) people where they are and (2) We need to invite and lead them out to where they can become.

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This viewpoint is in accord with the educational philosophy of Neil Postman in his book, *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* (1979). Postman proposes what he calls a thermostatic theory of education. A thermostat, he explains, is a mechanism for triggering opposing forces. Its job is to make what is too warm cooler and too cool warmer. A thermostat, in short, releases a counterargument. One might say, it is in a dialectical relationship with its environment (19). For Postman, it is an apt metaphor. "Education," he writes, "is best conceived of as a thermostatic activity. From this point of view, education tries to conserve tradition when the rest of the environment is innovative. Or, it is innovative when the rest of the society is tradition-bound. . . . The function of education is always to offer the counter argument, the other side of the picture. The thermostatic view of education is not ideology centered. It is balance centered. Its aim at all times is to make visible the prevailing biases of a culture" (19–20). "Our culture," Postman asserts, "is overdosing on change." "We know very well," he notes, "how to change but we have lost the art of preservation. Without at least a reminiscence of continuity and tradition, without a place to stand from which to observe change, without a counter argument to the overwhelming thesis of change, we can easily be swept away" (21). Schools, and churches, then, ought to serve as society's memory banks . . . putting forward the case for what is *not* happening in culture. Postman's argument is *conservative*, but it is not what passes for (or masquerades as) conservative in some political or ecclesiastical circles today (i.e., superficial right wing zealotry). On the contrary, his position is deeply (radical) conservative.[1]

In that spirit, this article is "conceived of as a thermostatic activity." It offers a counterargument over against what I perceive as some of the losses, weaknesses, or distortions in contemporary youth and young adult culture, especially in relation to the life of our Christian churches. However, do not mis-read or understand me too quickly here. This is not a jeremiad against young people. It is simply to make the argument that some corrections (or restoration of balance) need to be made . . . and when they are, young adults may have a better opportunity to grow in wisdom, age, and knowledge before God and humankind in our social and public life.

In recent years, sociologists of religion (Smith 2005; Wuthnow 2007) and other research organizations (Pew Forum on Religion and

[1]See Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner, *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (1969) a decade earlier in response to different cultural currents.

Public Life 2008; 2010) have offered a portrait of the sense and sensibilities of young people. This data is invaluable. Ministerially and educationally, it warrants serious consideration and response. This article focuses on three facets of the portrait that consistently appears in nearly all the studies. The portrait that has emerged is: young people are

1. spiritual, not religious,
2. anti-institutional, anti-church, and
3. apathetic or dismissive of tradition.

We can distinguish these three elements, but, in practice, they overlap, intertwine, and are inter-related. The article's thesis is: these three characteristics if true—even in a rough form—need educational correction. We will take each up in turn.

SPIRITUAL, NOT RELIGIOUS

What are we to make of the mantra: "I'm spiritual, not religious" . . . so associated, but not exclusively, with millennials? This sentiment is increasingly common in modern Western society. It postulates that individuals should fashion their unique relationship with God, mediated only through their own human experience, without belonging to any religious form or structure. Data paradoxically shows: people's private prayer life is growing although the impact of religion on their lives is diminishing (Gallup and Lindsay 1999; Roof 1999).

"I'm spiritual" has come to connote a journey of self-discovery, the fashioning of a coherent inner "spiritual self" without formal religious affiliation. This search for a coherent inner "self" is meant to sustain one through the upheavals of life's personal passages. This journey of self-discovery creates a space for attending to one's inner growth, on one's own flexible terms, and of one's own choosing. The goal is to arrive at a sense of one's own uniqueness, authenticity, and truth. This journey may be undertaken within a given religious system, but where the mantra currently prevails, the quest tends to be pursued in an autonomous and eclectic fashion without any formal religious affiliation.

On the other hand, being "religious" often connotes today being "rigid," "uptight," "dogmatic," "close-minded" (Roof 1999). Institutional church, with its creeds, codes and clerical hierarchical structures, seems too confining for many. They do not wish to make the commitment required by active membership in any organized religion. What has emerged here is the uncoupling of the spiritual from the religious. Robert Wuthnow (1998) captures this shift when he notes: traditional spirituality dwelt in the settled patterns of received truths and time honored traditions. This has given way, he writes, to a new "spirituality of seeking" in which people negotiate and construct their own (spiritual) meanings (3–4). In this regard, William Dinges (1996) observes, "For many contemporary Christians, 'care of the soul' has become divorced from any meaningful or compelling connection to a disciplined community or to an organized historical tradition. [It] has assumed an eclectic and do-it-yourself quality. Spirituality has become an element in the culture of 'preference', a 'life-style' choice. . . . The spiritual quest is a purely individual task divorced from institutional loyalties and commitment and devoid of any form of hierarchical control or social inheritance" (218). This shift creates a new dualism or split and presents immense challenges for our churches. It also calls for new ministerial and educational strategies. But first we must understand the origin of the split . . . and the current infatuation with the spiritual.

Spirituality, as we have observed, is undergoing a widespread renaissance. The interest is phenomenal and touches multiple levels in our society. On the academic level, there has been a resurgence of interest in historical figures, Christian mystics, such as Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Siena, Hildegard of Bingen, and Ignatius of Loyola. Among popular audiences, books on spirituality regularly hit the best seller list and have their own section in every large bookstore. TV audiences can tune in daily to Oprah, Suzie Orman, or Deepak Chopra for discussions on how to integrate the spiritual with love, sex, marriage, work and monetary success. A growing number of persons are engaging in mind-body practices such as yoga, meditation, Tai Chi and Zen mindfulness exercises. Is this interest in the spiritual just a passing fad? Does it offer people rich resources for navigating life's challenges or is it illusionary? Or is it a mix of both? And where did this eruption of the spiritual come from?

The *new* spirituality addresses the novel situation of the present. There is a hunger, a quest (in people's lives) beyond the material. In this sense, the quest for a spiritual life can be seen as a genuine

prophetic protest against a dehumanizing culture and some meaningless forms of religion. Anthony Giddens (1991) views this quest as a prime manifestation of late modern culture. In their private lives, people are increasingly cut off from the bonds of traditional social institutions (e.g., extended family and local communities) where they are free to do whatever they want. In the public sphere, they are dominated by highly impersonal bureaucratic (economic, political, health care) institutions. Where can people feel anchored today? They face the challenging task of individually constructing some kind of coherent "inner self" that can sustain them through the upheavals and turbulences of modern life. Giddens writes: they "are forced to negotiate life style choices among a diversity of options" (5). And more and more people are going about this task without the benefit of membership in traditional religious institutions. Why? Because it is not a credible and meaningful option for them. This sends them outside institutionalized religion to have their spiritual thirst quenched. And the *new* spirituality attempts to respond to their deep yearnings. There are lessons to be taught here by spiritual seekers, and lessons to be learned by religious (church, synagogue, mosque) institutions.

Spirituality today, in all its multiple forms, is seen as the great unifier. It is based on the notion of holism. The vague all inclusive meaning of the term is seen as an advantage. Gabriel Moran writes: "the driving force behind the emergence or re-emergence of the spiritual is the desire for a unifying idea. There is a deeply felt need for something that would overcome the fragmentary character of contemporary life" (in Harris and Moran, 1998, 106). Dualisms abound: body–soul, religious–secular, human–nature, science–religion, East–West. The "new spirituality" holds the promise of healing the world's splits. However, caution is needed here. A premature jump into unity may be illusionary. Glittering generalities may be deceptive. The vague all-inclusive meanings of spirituality can float into abstractions in spite of some of the creative and well-meaning practices that function under its canopy today.

However, with its current amorphous meaning, spirituality can mean just about anything—except, of course, religion. There is fuzziness, a Disneyland, cafeteria-style choosing, an eclecticism to some forms of contemporary spirituality that mixes spiritual practices from the East with some elements of the Jewish and Christian tradition. This can simply become another consumer item for self-fulfillment: a form of "The Gospel according to 'Me'" (Critchley and Webster 2013). Luke Timothy Johnson notes, "a great deal of what calls itself

spirituality these days is more psychic self-grooming than engagement with the Holy Spirit of God" (Johnson 2006, 30). William Dinges (1996), agreeing with these sentiments, writes: "in the context of a cultural setting dominated by an ethos of therapy and narcissisms, spirituality has also been readily conflated with psychology . . . religious symbols in such a milieu are readily transformed into therapeutic ones. Faith is reduced to another mode of self-help therapy or a toolkit mechanism for meeting psychological needs related to individual affirmation, personal growth, personal fulfillment, or the perennial American quest to reinvent the self" (219). This is one of the dangers in the *new* spirituality. This can lead to forms of escapism and spirituality devoid of firm roots. And this is the result of the divorce of spirituality from religion—and why it is in critical need of religion and its set of religious practices.

Religion, with all its flaws, acts as a wise restraint on our spiritual drive, and, at the same time, nourishes it with centuries of (external) religious practices. There is a living Christian tradition of the contemplative life, spiritual classics and spiritual guides to direct people on the way. The Christian religion, at its best, offers an embodied spirituality rooted in the concrete, and imbedded in the particularities of human experience. It is radically incarnational and profoundly historical as it directs people in justice to repair the world. If personal spirituality is to be both sustaining in the long run and transformative of the broader society, it needs a larger context of religious institutions that provides a core/master narrative and rituals that offer an interpretative framework for one's life from birth to death. In other words, our internal spiritual quest (for a coherent self) has to be linked to a historical tradition, to a disciplined community life, and to a just and peaceful concern for all creatures both human and non-human. This can open access to young adults to come out religiously to participate in our social and public spaces. What is critically needed in our time, then, is a reconciliation of the spiritual and religious. They ought to be natural allies, not divisive competitors. The spiritual is the life-blood of religion and religion gives form, direction, nurturing, and boundaries to enrich the spiritual life. They can co-exist in healthy tension with each other. When they are genuine partners (in wisdom and grace) young adults can reframe their mantra to: "I'm spiritually religious and religiously spiritual." However, before they utter this refrain, they will need to confront their anti-institutional propensities. We turn now to engage this element in their life portrait.

ANTI-INSTITUTIONAL, ANTI-CHURCH

Hazel Motes, the male protagonist of Flannery O'Connor's novel, *Wise Blood*, tries to found a new church, one without Christ. It will, he said, be a church "where the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way." It will offer some of the usual ecclesiastical practices (e.g., preaching and rituals), but also redemption without Christ. Half a century earlier, Oscar Wilde wrote of his desire to found "an order for those who cannot believe: the Confraternity of the Faithless." The members of Wilde's confraternity would not believe in the creeds and dogmas of the church, and not in Jesus, as the Christ. Motes and Wilde imagined or hoped, in their very different ways, that the Church's gifts (of grace) might be received without creeds, without the cross, and without the sacraments (quoted in Griffiths 2012, 24). That hope has not died in our time (Griffiths 2012). In fact, it has re-emerged in startling numbers today in the lives of millions of people—a significant number of whom are young adults.

According to a recent 2012 report by the Pew Forum on Religion and the Public Life, titled *"Nones" on the Rise*, the number of people who claim no religious affiliation has increased from slightly more than 15% to just under 20% of all U.S. adults (33million). The survey found that 30% of U.S. adults under 30 have no religious affiliation, compared with only 10% over 65. The drop occurs across such demographic divides as age, levels of education, and income. Various theories are set forth to explain the exodus from organized religion: postponement of marriage and parenthood, the growth of secularization, and "political backlash" against the perceived entanglement of the churches with right-wing conservative politics. In its February 2008 survey, The Pew Research Center found that Roman Catholicism has experienced the greatest net losses. One out of every three U.S. adults who were raised Roman Catholic have left the church. If these ex-Catholics were to form a single church, they would constitute the second largest church in the nation. J. Patrick Hornbeck II (and his colleague Tom Beaudoin) contend that this "deconversion," "disaffiliation," "disengagement" is one of the most theologically and sociologically significant phenomena in contemporary U.S. Roman Catholicism (Hornbeck 2011; Beaudoin 2011). This pattern of loss, according to Peter Steinfels, may well be the wave of the future, and represents advanced signs of a young adult generational loss (2010). However, lack of affiliation or engagement, the study points out, does not mean lack of spirituality operative in their lives.

Still, the trend, and the reasons behind it, ought to be cause to sit up and take notice. Today young adults, Harold Horell (2003) notes, are more critical of religious institutions than past generations. They are suspicious of "organized" religion, even going so far as to claim that, for some, the suspicion borders on apathy. For many millennials, institutional religions are not responding adequately to changes in the world. Religious officials in positions of authority are, at times, perceived as hypocritical, judgmental, and out of sync with shifting attitudes on sex and marriage. Institutions—religious institutions—are perceived as cold, dogmatic, impersonal, and empty structures. Millennials, on the other hand, looking beyond religion, seek a personal faith and more authentic ways of connecting with God, self, and others (Horell). They are deeply ambivalent about institutional churches being the sole source of ultimate authority. Religious institutions have little relevance for their religious identity and their subjective spiritual quest. This is a conundrum for the churches and a huge challenge for parish ministry and religious education.

Where can religious communities begin with an educational response? First, the church's failure to live up to its mission and ministry must be forthrightly acknowledged—when and where warranted. The wide array of issues raised by young people (the sex abuse of children, some church teachings, policies, and practices) should not be seen necessarily as simply rebellious, but rather as a genuine yearning for new forms of authentic religious life. On the other hand, it is this very yearning and search that can make them vulnerable to the influence of charismatic leaders and cults.

Religion, in its ecclesial form, has an organizational problem—its form, design, polity, sexual, and cast arrangements. But, the renewal and revitalization of the church, Brad Hinze notes, begins with lament—to mourn and grieve its failures. Lament, he writes, can serve as a catalyst for a prophetic critique of the church and society (Hinze 2011). Here we can stand in solidarity with young adults.

But, once again, caution is needed here. In terms of this author's affiliation, Roman Catholic institutional life—at every level—needs reform, refashioning, and redesigning, if the yearnings and searchings of young people are to be creatively and adequately addressed. However, that is very different than being anti-institutional or dis-engaging from institutional religion. Gabriel Moran writes, "I do not deny that religions are the source of superstition, violence and misogyny. They can also be a discipline of life, a comfort to the suffering, a source of moral courage, and a hope for a transformed world" (2011, xii). Institutions (political, economic, ecclesial) are at the center of contemporary society. They are indispensable for civilized living today. Their absence would spell chaos or/and accelerate an even more radical individualism. It is as simple as this: there is no Christian tradition without an *institution* to preserve it, as well as a (local) *community* to live it (Tilley 1994, 193). We can distinguish between both. But we distinguish not to separate but to bring them back into a dialectical creative relationship. Enduring religions have both *institutional* and *communal* elements. A significant characteristic of a community is that it is gathered—face to face—where personal relations are valued and nurtured. The Catholic Church as parish, the Protestant Church as congregation, is gathered and local. But the Catholic Church as institution, and the Protestant Church as institution, is worldwide—spanning out over diocese, nation, and globe. Institutions house and carry traditions—preserving the insights of their charismatic founders. If a religious community (e.g., the Jesus community), wants to retrieve and make accessible the wisdom and charism of its founder, it has no option but to routinize itself and codify its tradition. Tilley writes, "The structures which emerge to 'carry on' and 'develop' the traditions inaugurated by the founder are religious institutions. It is these institutions which make possible a transmission of tradition to second-and third-generation disciples of the leader, whether those disciples are distant from the leader in time . . . or in location" (1994, 187). Churches, mosques, and synagogues are these institutional life forms where people learn a tradition, practice a tradition, and are shaped into a cumulative (religious) tradition.

Of course, how the institution is constituted, its form, shape, design, patterns of power, how it is managed, its inclusivity or exclusivity, can affect the viability of the tradition, peoples' spiritual experiences within it and their religious development or disillusionment. Parishioners and members of congregations have, all too often, experienced battles, or certainly are aware of them, at the parish, diocesan, national or higher bureaucratic levels. Institutions can be obstacles to the prompting of the Holy Spirit, but that should not be cause to dismiss them and drop out of them. Rather, it should be taken as an invitation to care for them by renewing them and reforming them so that they contain, conserve, and transmit its treasure in earthen vessels. Vibrant (priestly and prophetic) religious institutions play a critical role in the development of a person's religious life, conversion to a tradition, deconversion and/or reconversion to another tradition,

and can provide a decisive shift in the shape of one's religious experience and practice (Tilley 1994, 195–204). Anti-institutional religion is one of the biases of modernity. In late modernity a counter argument needs to be offered that hospitable forms of institutional religion are internal and external to an intelligent religious way of being in the world in the 21st century. The vocational task and call, then, is to take religious and educational responsibility to invite young adults to come out into wholesome and healthy institutional forms of religious life. After all, private, non-institutional religion does not exist.

APATHETIC TO TRADITION

We turn now to the third facet in the portrait of young adults in the contemporary religious landscape, namely, the demise, even dismissal, of a strong sense of tradition among some, but not all, young adults.

Tradition is not a very popular term in liberal educational circles today. Progress, perpetual change, interruption, permeability is the linguistic currency of late modernity. But there is no tomorrow without tradition. In many ways, our lives are governed by the given and the inherited. As William Faulkner wrote in, *Requiem for a Nun*, "the past is never dead. It's not even past." We witnessed this in the community response to the Newtown, CT killing of 20 children and 7 adults at the Sandy Hook Elementary School on December 14, 2012. The funerals and burials—over a two week period—took place in Catholic, Congregational, Mormon, and United Methodist houses of worship, among others. They were held in Protestant mega churches and in a Jewish cemetery. A black Christian youth group traveled from Alabama to perform "Amazing Grace" at several services. This was religious belief in action, faith expressed at its deepest and to its fullest. The ancient rituals facilitated deep mourning. They comforted, consoled. They enabled people to cope. They healed. They were the indispensable practice of tradition.

Fortunately, tradition continues to supply people with wisdom about living and dying so that each generation does not have to begin anew or rely solely on its own insights. It resists the belief that we think only for ourselves. We grow from our past and only flourish when we are in touch with that past. As G.K. Chesterton wrote, tradition is "an extension of the franchise by giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors" (1959, 48). It is a democracy of the dead, as well as of the living. Jaroslav Pelikan writes, "By including the dead in the

circle of discourse we enrich the quality of the conversation" (1984, 81). The teacher's job (catechist, teacher of religion, youth minister, preacher, social justice minister) is to show people how to live (and die) according to the best wisdom of the tradition. The tradition, however, will not make our life-decisions for us, but it provides a privileged vantage point from which we can do so.

Tradition, of course, can become life-less and degenerate into traditionalism. It can be made into a strait-jacket or dead weight. We see this in certain areas of the church where tradition is affirmed but in an uncritical way. But there is no innocent tradition. There may be elements in the tradition that binds and constricts. It may be contaminated by sexism, racism, classism, and so on. It may be a carrier of sin as well as grace. However, the attempt to overthrow tradition, to dispossess or deconstruct it (as is prevalent in some postmodern academic circles, e.g. Beaudoin 2008, 136–154) rather than reform it, by asking critical and creative questions of it, is disastrous. Pelikan (1984) asserts: "tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living . . . and it is traditionalism that gives tradition such a bad name" (65). In fact, our traditions cease to be authentic when they become fossilized. Margaret Steinfels writes, "A tradition is not a browned and dried-up certificate of deposit in the bank of knowledge, but a locus for questioning, a framework for ordering inquiry, a standard for preferring some set of ideas over others; tradition is the record of a community's conversation over time about its meaning and direction. A living tradition is a tradition that can raise questions about itself" (2013, 8). Tradition to be alive, then, has to be in constant change. And when it is, the alienation or fracture some of our people (young and old) feel over against it can be healed. Tradition is a sustained argument over time. It is the oral stream that provides the origin and larger context of what is passed on. It is a never ending subversive process. It is constantly becoming other than it is. It is a fundamental resistance to stasis. Tradition, literally, is the process of handing on. And a religious tradition is a process of handing on an enduring set of practices: the handing on of a pattern of attitudes, beliefs and practices—including vision. What the tradition presents is a way of life. It provides a pathway on how to behave—how to conduct one's self—and how to think. This, in turn, acts as social glue, bringing cohesiveness to a people and fashioning their individual and collective identity (Tilley 2000).

The Acts of the Apostles describe the life of the early Christian community in a way that is fundamental for the church of our time:

"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). The handing on is of *this* integral way of life. Here are vital components of the Christian tradition: constant renewed study, liturgical worship, catechesis to foster growth in faith, practical love of God and neighbor—service to the poor, widow, and orphan. At its best, this is a magnificent vision and sacramental way of life, and an inexhaustible resource of enlightenment, inspiration and wisdom. Young people need to be found worthy to inherit it. The loss of a sense of tradition goes back to the 18th century. Modernity was a revolt against tradition. Late modernity has to offer the counter argument.

Fundamental to education, then, especially religious education is the understanding that one cannot simply step outside one's tradition or simply cast it off. Liberation is always to something better *within* the tradition. It is to a deeper and richer tradition. This is the lesson taught by the great educational and religious reformers: return to origins and reclaim the tradition in its breadth and rich diversity.

Finally, religious educators and youth ministers are trustees and mediators of our traditions. Dwayne Huebner writes, "Teachers are called to be trustees of ways of life that would decay and be forgotten were it not for them" (1987, 20). Their task is to maintain "the liberating quality of the various traditions" by guarding against their fixity and stereotyping. "The teacher," Huebner also notes, "is a mediator between the young person and the tradition. On the one hand, the teacher re-presents the tradition to the student in such a way that it can be a factor in the young person's narrative. . . . On the other hand, the teacher is called to bring to the surface the present, those dimensions of the young person's past and present that have some bearing on the tradition" (23). This is the vocation of all teachers—parents, preachers, school teachers, and ministers in education. Their responsibility is to facilitate the passing on . . . the passing on of a living and vital tradition—so that our people-, young and old and those yet to be born, will be conscious participants in the tradition, not unconscious victims (Pelikan 1984, 53). Education is this passing on—it *is* tradition.

The thesis of this article has been that, at this time, our educational efforts should be directed toward: re-connecting and re-integrating the spiritual and religious; offering young people an institutional church life worthy of their allegiance; and, gifting them with renewed, re-invented religious traditions appropriate for our time and for each generation. People, young and old, deserve no less. The core argument and proposal here has been fundamentally conservative, in

the sense of conservation. This, Hannah Arendt reminds us, "is of the essence of educational activity." "Basically," she writes, "we are always educating for a world that is or is becoming out of joint." The educator's task is to mediate between the past and the future. With our eyes glued to the past, to educate is to allow those in our midst to see that they are altogether worthy of our ancestors (Arendt 1961, 192–194). This is the surest guarantee that our young adults will come out and accept the invitation to participate in and contribute to repairing our social and public world.

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