The 1997 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture
"At-Risk Youth, At-Risk Church: What Jesus Christ and American Teenagers
are Saying to the Mainline Church"

Introduction

Webster's has two meanings for the term "mainline." The one teenagers
know is the practice of injecting narcotics directly into the bloodstream to
get a quick high. The second definition means the principle route a train
takes to reach its destination.

Pick your metaphor. The term "mainline church" was coined when trains,
like churches, were a principal means of getting somewhere people wanted
to go. Today, teenagers' understanding of "mainline" paints an ominous
portrait of who we are as a church: once-able bodies who, after years of
steady injections of American culture into our veins, have a dulled sense of
who, what, and where we are.

We have reared a generation of teenagers to "just say no" to such behavior,
and they're saying "no" to mainline Christianity in favor of visions of vitality
elsewhere, many that endanger teenagers. According to a 1991 study
released by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, one in four
teenagers is "at risk." The church must work with others to create
communities of health and hope for young people.

Young people are also making another point. Their exodus from our pews
and programs is a form of "tough love" to our denominations, telling us to
shape up, to be who we say we are, and to let Jesus be who we say He is -
the Savior, even of the mainline church.

In our "I'm dysfunctional, you're dysfunctional" world, it is easy to settle for
therapy when resurrection is at stake. Maybe being "at risk" as a church
isn't bad if it calls us back to the authenticity young people expect, and the
Gospel requires. Maybe mainline churches and teenagers have something in
common: a need to be saved.

These assumptions unite the lectures in this volume. The lectures in these
pages provide an outline of "what Jesus Christ and American teenagers are
saying to the mainline church" from the perspectives of systematic
theology, practical theology, sociology, education, and American religious
history (and futurism).

These lectures point to a theological foundation for ministry with young
people that views youth as part of the mission of Christ and not as objects to
be "won" for the propagation of the church. We approach this direction
with humility and hope. The future of the church, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer
noted when he himself was only twenty-seven years old, depends not on

youth, but on Jesus Christ. Still, we are confident that young people are prophets in our midst, and that by attending to the "risk" that accompanies adolescence in 1997, we will be better prepared to take the risk that accompanies Christian faith in any era.

Godspeed,
Kenda Creasy Dean
Director, Institute for Youth Ministry
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1997 Lectures

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Sara Little
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AT-RISK YOUTH

Wade Clark Roof

ur theme is a challenging one: "At-Risk Youth, At-Risk Church: What Jesus Christ and American Teenagers Are Telling the Mainline Church." The very juxtapositions in the title force us to give new thought to what is happening today. Jesus Christ and American teenagers — I am sure people, some church people, would be flabbergasted by the thought that these two might have any kind of united front over and against the church. And the possibility that these two might have something to say to the mainline church in particular would be upsetting to some. Yet the boldness of this theme invites us to do some hard thinking about the church and its ministry to youth today.

My task here is to provide a sociological framework for our discussion. I do so, of course, as a sociologist, not as one trained in theology or pastoral ministry. This means that what I have to say ought to be looked upon as grist for our collective grinding; and hopefully out of discussion and reflection some new insights will emerge. In my three lectures I plan to do the following: first, to describe some of the social and cultural changes that engulf the lives of youth today; second, to look more specifically at the spiritual quests of young people; and finally, to offer some suggestions for ministry.

So in this first lecture, let us turn to the social and cultural changes that are shaping the contexts in which ministry occurs. Some of what I say is hardly new to anyone who has reflected upon the contemporary scene, but the scope and great variety of changes affecting our lives today pose an enormous challenge to

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churches, and to youth ministry in particular. I will describe six major develop-ments that I think are crucial in shaping the world in which teenagers now live.

First: Young people face an uncertain economic future. Contrary to the wide-ly held belief that youth is the best time of one's life, young people now consti-tute one of the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in the entire population. As we have moved from an industrial to a post-industrial economy over the past several decades, young people have become disenfranchised. We have told youth that they need education, and they do, but the fact of the mat-ter is that today's youth live in an educationally inflated world. Numerous jobs that once required only a high school education now require a university educa-tion, even though the jobs are virtually the same. We educate our children more than we did in the past, and still many youth only see for themselves rather dis-mal prospects for the future: part-time jobs, poor pay, and competition in a glob-al economy where unpredictable market shifts directly affect opportunities.

Feeling overeducated for the jobs available, our youth wonder what kind of future can they expect. They feel pushed out of jobs by the growing number of retired people now increasingly competing for the McJobs — the part-time, poor-paying jobs particularly in the fast-food industries. Over the years I have asked students in my classes at the two universities where I have taught about how many of them worked in fast-food places like McDonalds or Burger King and about the experiences they had there. I have noticed that in the past ten years or so, students talk much less glowingly about their work experiences in such establishments.

The economic realities they now face lead many young people to wonder if they will have a lower standard of living than that of their parents. The vision of unlimited education resulting in unlimited economic growth and the perpetua-tion of the American Dream simply have not been realized. That fact in itself is stigmatizing — youth perceive that they may not "make it" as generations before them have done. As a result, they feel cheated and marginalized. Some blame themselves: how will they explain to their children what happened?

Moreover, youth are conditioned to stay younger longer. Feeling unwelcomed into, and often barred from, a secure adult world, they live in an extended youth subculture bolstered by mass media images of themselves in search of a life. Many of our youth, including substantial numbers from mainstream America, are caught up in the discrepancy between their hopes and aspirations and the reali-ties and prospects they face. Many are living with their parents for longer peri-ods of time and a lot of them are, or will be, "boomerang kids," those who leave home for a while but come back. Not surprisingly, middle-class parents report helping their children financially well into their adult years, leaving us to wonder about those children who are less fortunate: who will help them, and what can they look forward to in their late teens and early adult years?

Second: Family life often is not very supportive and nourishing. This is the part of their lives in which many teenagers and Generation Xers experience great

hurts and psychological scars. More than half of them have divorced parents. More than half have or had working mothers. Many of them are known as "latchkey" kids. One in three, reportedly, have been physically or sexually abused, often by a stepparent. Many have been neglected by well-meaning parents in pursuit of their own careers.

What impact does all of this have on young people? For one thing, it generates a sense of being alone. Let me relay a story from William Mahedy and Janet Bernardi's book titled A *Generation Alone*. Bernardi writes:

> Not long ago, I found a friend crying because her brother had
> failed to fulfill a promise — again. She was devastated by the
> realization that she had never been able to rely on him, or on
> anyone. My friend, like many Xers, learned very early to rely
> only on herself. She felt abandoned by her father, who had
> left after her parents' divorce. She felt abandoned by her
> mother, who had pursued her career and left her with a nanny.
> And she felt she could never rely on her brother, who was fol-
> lowing well the examples his parents had set. She felt alone.[1]

Bernardi goes on to say:

> Many, perhaps most, of us have never experienced real relia-
> bility and responsibility. My friend cannot rely on her family
> for support — nor can she rely on her mechanic to be honest,
> her doctor to prescribe only the tests that are necessary, her
> friends to help her bear her burdens, or strangers to be kind.
> She feels afraid of being shot, afraid of being held up at the
> cash machine, afraid to go on a date with a man. Like many
> Xers her age, she is financially independent and lives with
> roommates. But no one really needs her, and she needs no
> one. This is aloneness.

Many commentators report that such aloneness is widespread. Aloneness is more than just being alone; it means not trusting others. Not trusting that there will be a place for you when you grow up. Or if you are grown up, not trusting that you are needed. Our economy reinforces this psychology when it tells young people they aren't needed. They can be replaced, and often are, by someone who can be paid less.

Perhaps it is unfair to lay all of this on the family. We have all heard plenty about divorce, absent fathers, and latchkey kids. Divorce continues to be with us, although it may have decreased just a little over the past decade. Paternal absenteeism is a problem — not just economically but because it often deprives children of a male role model. Latchkey kids — we have too many of them. More than enough disdain has already been dumped on single-parent families, many of whom are struggling to survive and to raise children as best as they can. But

there is no denying that in our time families are fragile institutions. And there is no denying that parents — whether one or two — are spending far too little time with their children. Some statistics indicate that many teenagers spend an average of less than thirty minutes a week in a "meaningful relationship" with their mothers and fifteen minutes a week with their fathers. Thus it is not surprising that for many youth the very word "family" has a negative ring about it. It brings up too many bad memories. Many teenagers today hunger for a good family experience, for a home they never had. Young people look for community wherever they can find it. They have a longing for belonging.

Third: Pluralism is real. Today's young people face the most pluralistic world ever with respect to religion, culture, and lifestyle. Some of us grew up in a time when ice cream came only as vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry. Now we have hundreds of flavors. The general store is gone and replaced by specialty shops.

Journalist Frances Fitzgerald suggests an interesting metaphor for a changing American society; she says we are "not a melting pot but a centrifuge."[2] A centrifuge is a piece of equipment in a scientific laboratory that spins substances out from the center at high speeds and sorts them into new densities. Our society is ever spinning out new groups and sorting them on the basis of new organizing principles. Historically, Americans have gathered socially and religiously on the basis of race, class, national origin, region, and language. Our churches, to a considerable extent, still reflect these cultural enclaves. But in a highly individualistic culture such as ours, increasingly we are bonding on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, lifestyle, and personal needs.

Hence today's teenagers are likely to be more attuned to bondings based on these more personal considerations than to the older cultural enclaves. Women's groups, gay communities, 12-step groups, and computer clubs seem more natural as groupings than do traditional denominational labels like Methodist, Presbyterian, or Lutheran. The fact is that except for the small number of youths that have remained close to the church, most youths do not know much about how or why groups by those names exist. Youth today are growing up in a society where the traditional churches have lost their hegemony over the culture, and denominational loyalty is weak. It is a society where there is no longer a strong religious center. Religion is whatever one *chooses* as one's own.

In contemporary America, those choices have never been greater. In 1978, J. Gordon Melton compiled a list of some 1200 different religious groups active in the United States. In the latest edition of his Encyclopedia of American Religion (1989), the number is upward of 2000 such groups! Gradually a new-style religious pluralism is emerging that is very different from the older pluralism of the past. This new pluralism is more global and brings traditions once thought of as alien right into our neighborhoods. Eastern faiths are a case in point. Thirty years ago the arrival of transcendental meditation, Hare Krishnas, and other mystical cults made news. Now such extraordinary groups are quite ordinary. Another example is the growing Muslim presence in the United States. If present trends con-

tinue, by the end of the first decade of the next century there will be as many Muslims as Jews in this country. That is a surprising prediction to people over fifty years of age, but for those younger it hardly seems surprising. It fits the world as they know it.

Pluralism has taken a psychological turn in the past decade. Religion has become personalized. We have to get "into" religion, not just join up. Organized religion has to compete with small groups, with house churches, with groups committed to saving the whales and other good causes, and with the expanding menu of religious and spiritual possibilities on the Internet. And even within a faith tradition, there is what Andrew Greeley calls "selective Catholicism" — picking and choosing what to believe and practice. In recent years, being "spiritual" but not "religious" as conventionally defined has emerged as a distinct possibility. Sheilaism, or some radical version of religious individualism, largely independent of churches or synagogues, attracts sizable numbers of Americans, both old and young. So it is that pluralism takes on new meaning. For younger Americans especially, pluralism is not just about many differing kinds of groups; it is about style and approach. William McKinney and I have called this the "New Voluntarism," emphasizing the fact that pluralism has been internalized and is now as much a psychological as an institutional reality.[3]

Fourth: The media shapes our lives. We are living in a time of a major transformation in communication, from a print culture to an image culture. That is no small transformation as we become more and more oriented to the visual media.

Teenagers are at the center of this transformation. "What used to be called stable is now called inflexible and outdated," declares George Barna. "This is a video-driven generation, with a three-to-four-minute attention span... used to short, crisp, colorful blocks" of video information.[4]

This video-driven generation is a product of the information age. Never before have we had so much information and so little real wisdom. Television barges in upon our lives ever more aggressively. It competes with family and church, and often surpasses church, as a socializing influence for young people, profoundly shaping the way they learn. Increasingly, that learning is visual. The visual consists of fleeting images, which if commentator Neil Postman is correct, means that our capability for sustained attention and rational argument is diminishing. The nineteenth century, he says, was the age of great debates and systematic theologies; by contrast, in the late twentieth century we are less oriented to the word and more oriented to constantly changing imageries.[5] Instancy and entertainment are features of this new medium; seeing, not reading or hearing, becomes the basis for believing. All of which is to say that our epistemologies are up for grabs. How people, especially young people, define truth and knowledge, even reality itself, is undergoing a transition.

"My generation is so inundated with information that we don't know what is truth anymore," writes Kevin Graham Ford, a Generation Xer. "We suffer from information overload. We see the political ads on TV, and we are confused.... We

don't know who's lying and who's telling the truth. So we vote for the one with the most attractive image."[6]

Media saturation and short attention spans are not the only consequences of the communications transformation. By age sixteen, the typical Generation Xer has witnessed thirty-three thousand murders on TV and in the movies. With all these repetitive images of violence, it's not surprising that they often see the world as a hostile, dangerous place. Paradoxically, their preoccupation with the media comes in part from a longing for family and human connection. As one Generation Xer puts it, "While Mom and Dad were out working or finding themselves, or in court suing each other for our custody and support payments, TV became our surrogate parent."[7]

Image bears directly upon youth identity. The paramount problem a young person has growing up today in a media-shaped world is how to formulate a viable and stable identity. Through its imageries the media encourages certain normative definitions of male and female, beginning very early for children, but especially compelling for adolescents. Adolescent females tend to live with more tension concerning their appearance than males. Research shows that most American female teenagers dislike their bodies, and many think they are overweight even when they are of average or below-average weight. While teenage boys are under pressure to be tall or muscular or macho, the tension between their self-concepts and the normative images does not seem to "kill" them in quite the same way that females "kill" themselves with obsessive dieting associated with anorexia and bulimia. Especially in middle-class homes, adolescent females face considerable pressures to be accepted, to identify with media definitions of femininity. As one commentator puts it, "the television female's existence still seems to be largely a function of her youth and beauty."[8]

For males and females alike, there is considerable vulnerability to identity manipulation by the media. Because of the extended youth phase of life that virtually all young people now experience, there is a prolonged period of gender conditioning and identity formation. Often this is a period of confusion and stress, much of which is a result of the conflicting imageries and values to which they are exposed. Partly for this reason, levels of stress, as reflected in suicide rates, emotional problems, and delinquency, are often high. With respect to suicide, one study reports a 72 percent increase for fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds since 1968, with rates for those in the twenty- to twenty-five age range being twice as high.[9] Clearly, coming of age in contemporary America is not easy. Not that it was ever really easy, but the stresses today are increasingly apparent.

Finally, a fifth observation: Religion seems to have lost much of its grounding for young people. Caught up in a world of powerful and seductive images, many youths find themselves casting about for what is religiously real.

Speaking about religion, Kevin Graham Ford writes: "Our view of God is relative. Our view of religion is skeptical. Our view of commitment is wary. Our view of reality is survivalist. Our thinking is relational and feeling oriented, not intel-

lectual. We live in the now; we can't imagine eternity."[10]

There is a strong emphasis on the here and now for today's teenagers. Partly this is born out of pessimism about the future; partly it reflects the loss of a strong religious vision. As Walker Percy observed in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, "This is not the Age of Enlightenment but the Age of Not Knowing What to Do." Unlike the baby boomers who thought they could save the world, this younger generation — or I should say, generations — feel a much greater sense of powerlessness to bring about much change.

The word "postmodern" is sometimes applied to the world in which teenagers increasingly live. It is a world in which the foundations seem to have been lost, a world of uncertainty as to what to believe. Today's teenagers, having grown up under conditions of widespread pluralism and an overload of fleeting images, so it is argued, hold to the following three observations about life:

1. There is no such thing as an absolute, objective point of view in matters of morality and religion.

2. Subjective experience supercedes logic and objective facts. We are free to choose what we believe according to what makes us feel comfortable.

3. The nature of truth and the nature of God are relative, not absolute, concepts. You have your God and I have mine.

These views all reflect shifts in the popular religious mood for many Americans in the 1990s, not just for teenagers. If you don't believe that many teenagers hold to such radical views, I suggest you stop by a local tatoo parlor and ask around. Of course, that is a small population — some call it a teenage wasteland — but views found there may be found in a milder form among large numbers of teenagers today. Indeed, if this be the case — that today's young people are drifting in a sea of relativism and subjectivity — what does all this mean for religion as it has been understood and practiced within the mainline Protestant churches? Of course, the description I have given you hardly applies to youth brought up in and remaining within the church. There are youth brought up within the church whose lives are not quite so adrift. The profile I have painted is rather the cutting edge, describing those most caught up in the storm created by rapid social and cultural changes in the late twentieth century. We cannot turn our backs on these young people. The definitions of life they hold to are our concern, too. They are concerns of ours, whether in the inner city or in the suburb, wherever the church confronts the emerging culture and looks for ways to minister amidst all its changes. It is to these considerations that we turn in the remaining lectures. ❖

NOTES

1. William Mahedy and Janet Bernardi, A Generation Alone: Xers Making a Place in the World (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), pp. 19-20.

2. Frances Fitzgerald, Cities on a Hill: A Journey through Contemporary American Cultures (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986).

3. Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

4. Quoted in Russell Chandler, Racing toward Two Thousand One: The Forces Shaping America's Religious Future (San Francisco: Harper SanFrancisco, 1987), p. 82.

5. Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business (New York: Penguin, 1986).

6. Kevin Graham Ford, Jesus for a New Generation: Putting the Gospel in the Language of Xers (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 60.

7. Ibid., p. 154.

8. Quoted in James E. Cote and Anton L. Allahar, Generation on Hold: Coming of Age in the Late Twentieth Century (New York: New York University Press, 1995), p. 92.

9. Ibid., pp. 58-62.

10. Kevin Graham Ford, Jesus for a New Generation, p. 134.