

More Faithful than their Parents

Are today's youth looking for God?

review article by Johan D. Tangelder

The nightly news paints a grim picture – reports on university and college students make one wonder about this future generation of leaders.

In the United States, for example, on many college campuses the issue of the day is now “transgender rights.” Students are demanding that, in addition to men's rooms and women's rooms, the administration set aside facilities for transgenders. Campuses are also being pressured to change their dormitory roommate policies. And at Smith, a prominent American women-only college, the students voted to eliminate female pronouns from the student constitution, since “she” and “her” were deemed to be insensitive to transgender students.

Many polls of young adults reveal a high tide of moral relativism among the next generation and deep suspicion of objective standards of truth and beauty. Indicators such as these do not portend a universal embrace of Christian orthodoxy and conventional morality. When you visit a typical secular university campus, either in the USA or in Canada, you would be hard-pressed to find a lively Christian presence. A casual observer, who scans the student newspapers, surveys bulletin boards, and visits a student centre, would find little awareness of Christianity.

In fact, relativism and postmodernism are pervasive in these institutions of higher education. Many assume moral law to be a social construct rather than a God-given reality of conscience and sense of justice. Relativists argue that no belief system or ethical code is superior to another, because there is no objective standard of truth or morality against which the system can be measured. No wonder American and Canadian students might be reluctant to embrace Christian orthodoxy, which calls for self-denial and singular devotion. Given this atmosphere, the odds of Christian orthodoxy flourishing on college campuses are mighty slim.

Reality check

The reality, however, is quite different. On many secular campuses, orthodox Christian fellowships and chaplaincies are among the largest and most active student groups. This unreported news is exciting and a most encouraging development within the broader culture of young adults. Colleen Carroll is one of these young adults. As a young adult orthodox Roman Catholic reporter for the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, she knew that the story of vibrant Christianity among young adults was being overlooked by the media. In 2000, she won a \$50,000 Phillips Journalism Fellowship that allowed her to take a year's leave from her newspaper job and travel throughout the United States, researching and writing about a little-noticed trend: The appeal of traditional religion and morality to a growing number of young Americans. The result of her research was *The New Faithful: Why Young Adults Are Embracing Christian Orthodoxy*. Carroll's research is impressive and her book is enjoying strong sales and garnering national media attention.

Carroll notes that in contrast to many of the previous generation, the young adults profiled in her book are turning to orthodox Christianity. She explores the uniqueness of this resurgence of belief, which seeks to engage rather than ignore culture. She shows that these young adults want authentic, personal, and convinced Christianity. But her book is more than an analysis of current trends. It's bringing together the profiles of a diverse generation of fervent young Christians who are shaking up the American religious scene. She shows how a new generation has found truth, beauty and fulfillment not in the trendy hot tubs of New Age spirituality but in the bracing truths and disciplines of an ancient faith – traditional and orthodox Christianity.

Seen through the lies

Carroll asks why young adults who have grown up in a society saturated with relativism are extolling the absolute truth claims of Christianity with such confidence. She wonders why young adults are attracted to the trappings of tradition that so many of their parents and professors have rejected. She queries why young adults are rejecting "the old, tired, liberal, modern" mind-set in favor of a modern orthodox one. Her book explains why so many young adults have changed their attitude toward orthodox Christianity. But her explanation is not so much an argument as it is a telling of stories. Carroll relies heavily on her own reporting, and mainly using personal profiles; she introduces the reader to a remarkable series of highly successful young adults, all of whom discovered in Christian orthodoxy the deeper meaning of life that they sought in vain elsewhere.

Carroll reports that on college and university campuses Christian students gravitate not only to those groups that seem tailored to their needs but also to groups that have a clear identity and strength of conviction. She also mentions the popularity of evangelical Christianity among young Asian Americans. But this is true also among young Asian Canadians. When I was involved with the Asian Christian Fellowship at the University of Western Ontario, I was impressed by their commitment to their Lord and their vibrant faith.

Why this renewed interest in orthodox Christianity? Carroll says, "Young adults who have grown up in a culture that celebrates self-indulgence and sexual license, and in churches that stress love of self more than service to God, have seen the fallout of self-fulfillment fads."

The pendulum swings back?

She also notes the consequences of the breakdown of the family, "Families divided by no-fault divorce. Adults pursuing pleasure or careers with reckless abandon. Children left to raise themselves, making adult decisions – and adult mistakes – well before their time. The pendulum swings, and they find themselves captivated by Christianity's emphasis on self-restraint, sacrifice, and commitment." Carroll argues that an embrace of traditional religion and morality often begins with the rejection of relativism. She observes that in a culture where young adults are frequently told that no universal moral standards or religious truths exist, many have begun to question that dictum and search for the truth that they believe is knowable. One example of rising

interest in orthodox Christianity is the Veritas Forum, a Christian grassroots movement that began at Harvard University in 1992. Kelly Monroe, a cofounder of Veritas Forum, tells in the epilogue of the best-selling book that she had edited, *Finding God At Harvard: Spiritual Journeys of Christian Thinkers*, about her inspiration for the forum, which explores the truth claim of orthodox Christianity on which the school was founded. She says that at Harvard anything goes – except orthodoxy. "It is no news that classical Christian thought has been politically, socially and theologically incorrect at Harvard. Believers are often considered its counterculture. Some students feel marginalized in the classroom, not because they are African-American, Asian-American, and international students but primarily because they are believers."

“Hard” trumps “vague”

In her book Carroll focuses mainly on evangelical Christianity and Roman Catholicism. Mainline Protestant churches do not figure prominently in her account. She says that there is a considered rejection of a Christianity that attempts to remake itself according to cultural trends that are themselves hostile to Scripture. She observes that those raised in mainline Protestant and Catholic churches typically complain that their faith formation consisted of vague platitudes about tolerance and love, not the "hard gospel" of sin and salvation.

For example, in mainline Protestantism, a generational divide has appeared between young evangelical Episcopalian converts and older, more liberal church leaders. Pairing up with elder conservative clergy in their home churches and more conservative Anglican clergy in developing nations, these young evangelicals are fighting the culture wars inside the American Episcopal Church. The two hot-button issues are the ordinations of homosexuals and the blessing of same-sex unions. Carroll also tells the story of Andrea and John Whitson – both wanted out of their Episcopalian church. They were alarmed by the national hierarchy's dissent from St. Paul's teaching on sexuality and by the ordination of secular active homosexual clergy. Both of them converted to Eastern Orthodoxy.

Carroll shows how attractive orthodox Christianity is for young adults who are dissatisfied with a secular worldview. Their spiritual search often begins on secular campuses, where students encounter an academic climate that scorns notions of objective truth and a unifying worldview. "In that atmosphere, the truth claims of Christian orthodoxy can be a refreshing, even rebellious, alternative." Campus fellowships with a blunt evangelical bent consistently attract more members than mainline groups that lack a distinctive identity or hesitate to proclaim the universality of the gospel message. Evangelical campus fellowships, such as InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and Campus Crusade for Christ, which are known for their unapologetic defense of Christian orthodoxy, have boomed in the past decade. Each week they continue to gather students by the dozens, even hundreds, to praise Jesus at secular schools, and their popularity shows no signs of abating. Even in Catholic circles, young adults increasingly are joining the fellowships and faith communities which unabashedly celebrate the particulars of the Catholic faith and encourage their members to proudly proclaim their beliefs. Young orthodox Catholics also are launching popular "renegade" fellowship groups at Catholic and secular universities, in a reaction against more liberal campus ministry programs that

have failed to articulate the faith or spark student interest. Catholic campuses across the country are seeing revivals of rosary recitations and eucharistic adoration – traditional devotions that some older campus ministers have tried unsuccessfully to discourage. These young Catholics want their church to practice what it teaches. For example, Georgetown University, a Jesuit school in Washington, D.C., has come under fire from Catholic students in recent years for removing crucifixes from classrooms, allowing Hustler's Larry Flynt to speak on campus, instituting mandatory safe-sex sessions with condom demonstrations, and allowing the formation of a campus abortion rights group.

Sacrifice welcomed

The young adults profiled in this book share some variations of two key experiences that led them to a fuller embrace of orthodoxy and the morality it demands. Carroll says that sometimes they experience a spiritual crisis on the heels of significant success in the secular world at an early age, which leave these young adults unsatisfied. And many crave tradition, historical continuity, and time-tested approaches to metaphysical questions they know they did not invent, so their spiritual journeys head in the direction of Christian orthodoxy. Once committed to orthodoxy, these young adults infuse their faith into every aspect of their lives. It guides every decision they make, and affects nearly every interaction they have at home, work, school, church, and in the culture at large.

Carroll reports that young adults want to learn about the sacraments and church history. They want to know the content of the Christian faith, its doctrines, its creeds and confessions. They want to know what their church stands for. They don't want "psychobabble." They don't want to be cuddled but challenged. They strive for personal holiness, authenticity, and integration in their spiritual lives and are attracted to people and congregations that do the same. Conversely, they are repelled by complacency, hypocrisy, and pandering. Their adherence to traditional morality and religious devotion often comes at considerable personal cost, and the sacrificial nature of these commitments are often precisely what makes them attractive. Carroll suggests that in addition to supporting existing youth ministry programs, church leaders would do well to listen to young orthodox believers about what new initiatives are needed. If they do, they will hear that churches need to be bolder in proclaiming Christian doctrine – particularly the reality of sin and the need for salvation – which is absent from so many mainline churches but attracts converts by the thousands to so many evangelical ones. They might also hear that conforming their churches to the world repels the young, but challenging the young to conform to Christ inspires and attracts. Just ask the leaders of conservative evangelical fellowships that attract students by the throngs on secular campuses.

Young orthodox adults yearn for a holistic approach to life. For example, in evangelical circles, young adults often recall many sermons on personal salvation but few discussions of how Christians should treat the poor, engage the culture, or learn from Christian history and tradition. They want to know how to engage secular culture, and how they can stop compartmentalizing their Christian beliefs and start applying them to life – to such issues as poverty, racism, unbridled individualism, and materialism. They are looking for an overarching worldview to help them make sense of the vast amount of disparate facts and theories they learn in their institutions of higher education. "They're

hungry for solid, substantial stuff." No wonder then, that a popular book for discussion groups is *How Now Shall We Live?* by Chuck Colson and Nancy Pearce. It challenges Christians to integrate faith into every aspect life. What a wonderful opportunity to present the Reformed world and life view!

Young adults also treasure authentic community. They seek support of other believers for career guidance. They are longing for stable families and close-knit communities. They see Christian fellowship as refuge from relativism. They want friends to encourage them and hold them accountable to their faith commitments. Christians on campus quickly find that their faith cannot survive without spiritual support. So they turn to fellowship groups and campus ministry organizations for sustenance and strength. Community is essential.

Hope

The New Faithful is an invaluable book for anyone engaged in ministry to this generation, with its great spiritual hunger. For orthodox Reformed Christians Carroll's message would be: stay the course, be involved in a campus ministry, listen to your young adults, build an authentic Christ-like community, and don't sell out your convictions. The good news is, contrary to what the secular media reports, the young products of postmodern, relativistic America and Canada, often incline toward Christianity's most morally vigorous teaching and most traditional devotions.