

Emerging generations and the challenge of being witnesses in our time

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While most of the delegates at the Edinburgh 1910 conference had, quote, “gone grey in service,”¹ conference leaders acknowledged the importance of young people. John Mott, for example, was one of the main organisers of 1910 and a founding member of the Students Volunteer Movement. But his involvement does not represent any significant wider involvement of young people or focus on mission specific to them. Kenneth Ross in *Edinburgh 2010* states that “Young people are still inadequately represented in the decision-making bodies of mission organisations and in missiology at large.”² The same can be said of many of our churches, regardless of whether they have a handful of young people or a large group.

The concept of young people at the 1910 mission conference at Edinburgh was vastly different to the concept of young people today. For example, in 1910 at Edinburgh, and within society as a whole, the teenager did not exist, let alone young adulthood, as a specific stage of life.

As the sociologist Talcott Parsons has pointed out, “Youth is not a universal category of biology. Rather, it is a changing social and cultural construct that appeared at a particular moment of time under definite conditions”³ First use of the word ‘teenager’ is traced to a 1941 article in a magazine called *Popular Science*. The term was increasingly used during World War II after which advertising and marketing gave it a life and use all of its own helping to shape who and what a teenager should be, and particularly what they should wear, drink, watch, listen etc. In other words, the teenager as a specific target market was born.⁴

Negotiating the Profile of Generations X and Y

In 1951 when *Time* magazine was examining the ‘silent’ generation (The Younger Generation) it asked: “Is it possible to paint a portrait of an entire generation?” This question continues to hold sociological, as well as missiological, relevance.

‘Don’t trust anyone over thirty’, (which originally was ‘25’) became the symbolic slogan of the boomer generation highlighting a growing ‘generation gap’. The term ‘generational gap’ emerged during the 1960s to explain the cultural differences and divisions emerging between boomers and their parents. Cultural differences in relation to fashion, music, politics, sexuality and drugs were particularly noticeable. Some of this disparity relates to the unprecedented size of this birth cohort that gave it unprecedented power and a significant voice and influence. However since then, Margaret Mead (1978) has argued that the generational gap has undergone domestication.⁵ Not only has this original generation gap undergone domestication but a generation later the Boomers found themselves in the uncomfortable position once occupied by their elders. The question for mission, and ecclesiology, is determining to what extent generation gaps actually exist and how we can bridge them in our calling to be the people of God?

Unlike the Baby Boomers, who became *Time's* 40th 'Man of the Year' (1967), the collective portrait of Generation X has been strikingly less complimentary.⁶ The name Generation X was born out of a Douglas Coupland novel by the same name. Coupland got the idea from the last chapter in a sociology book on class by Paul Fussell.⁷ In an article on GenX Coupland (ND, *Generation X'd*) explains the sociological influence of the term:

The book's title came not from Billy Idol's band, as many supposed, but from the final chapter of a funny sociological book on American class structure titled *Class*, by Paul Fussell. In his final chapter, Fussell named an "X" category of people who wanted to hop off the merry-go-round of status, money, and social climbing that so often frames modern existence. The citizens of X had much in common with my own socially disengaged characters; hence the title. The book's title also allowed Claire, Andy, and Dag to remain enigmatic individuals while at the same time making them feel a part of the larger whole.⁸

The point I want to emphasize, which has implications for mission to emerging generations of young adults and young people, is that despite sharing a historical birth date, generations X and Y's sociological profiles are somewhat ambiguous. Generation X and GenY are something of a floating signifier, created, Sherry Ortner argues, by 'the politics of representation.'⁹ So different interests, political claims, and marketing intentions are at work in the competing representations. The politics of representation has resulted in GenX being misrepresented over the years.¹⁰ Coupland blames this on,

boomer angst-transference... who feeling pummelled by the recession and embarrassed by their own compromised 60s values, began transferring their collective darkness onto the group threatening to take their spotlight. As a result Xers were labelled monsters. Their protestations became "whining"; being mellow became "slacking"; and the struggle to find themselves became "apathy".¹¹

Theorizing Generations

Karl Mannheim's (1952) now famous essay, 'The Problem of Generations', has become the central reference point for many contemporary discussions in sociology and politics concerning generational issues. Mannheim argues that a distinction between the categories 'generation location', 'generation as actuality', and 'generation unit', is required for any deeper analysis of generations.¹² Mannheim insists on the importance of specific sociological influences in the development of a social generation. Mannheim emphasises the importance of distinguishing between the various subgroups to be found within each generation. Being born during a similar period, the markers of a birth cohort, does not, Mannheim points out, guarantee common life experience or worldview.

Mannheim's distinction between generation as *location* and generation as *actuality* is an important one. Generation as location refers to the broadest use of the term; coexisting or being located with others of the same age or born between a certain period. A generation as an actuality begins to become more specific as it refers to a community of shared experiences and feelings.¹³ This shared experience of an actual generation occurs at a general level. Mannheim's concept of *generational unit* provides a more specific analysis of generations. Generational units share a similar view and interpretation about events and in the process a shared identity. Mannheim (1952, 304) explains the difference between a generational unit and an actual generation as follows:

The generation unit represents a much more concrete bond than the actual generation as such. Youth experiencing the same concrete historical problems may be said to be part of the same actual generation, while those groups within the same actual generation which work up the material of their common experience in different specific ways constitute separate generation units.

Mannheim speaks of the phenomenon of ‘stratification’, similar to life stages when various generations can experience certain historical processes together yet do not share the same generation location due to their social situatedness. Social stratification such as class, gender, race and religion all influence the way one responds to, and interprets, significant social and cultural change and events.¹⁴ Of course, cross-cultural mission has responded to some of this difference through the emphasis on the contextualization of the gospel. But this is something often overlooked in the literature on generations X and Y, rendering them homogenous generations. This is problematic if churches are reading this literature to form some sort of strategy to ‘reach’ such generations.

Tom Beaudion, who argues that a defining characteristic of GenX is their common engagement with popular cultural events,¹⁵ concedes that participation in the forms of popular culture that he discusses in *Virtual Faith* requires ‘at least middle-class status (because it often requires access to disposable income).’

We need to be thinking theologically about why we do what we do. We need to ask questions about the implications of developing tailor made services to reach a particular generation, or age group, especially as this is often advocated in the generational and religion literature. Otherwise the group or their profile as described by any particular book begins to set the agenda and so we do this and that; such as have some candles, or show a clip from a movie etcetera. Rather than the agenda being set by the fact that we are the people of God and so we do such and such.

Alex Ross has described the “ongoing symposium on generational identity...[as] a fruitless project blending the principles of sociology and astrology.”¹⁶ Others have concluded that popular literature on generational differences may be “engaging, entertaining, and intuitively appealing” but they are in actual fact ‘little more than caricature – exaggerated and distorted to engage popular interest’¹⁷ The Hudson report has found that ‘The belief that there are large and dramatic differences among youth cohorts in different generations has not been supported by high-quality longitudinal research.’¹⁸ Generational characteristics and attitudes have found to be overstated in relation to politics¹⁹, work attitudes²⁰ (Hudson, 2006; Hooper, 2006), religion²¹ and life values more generally.²²

Furthermore, generational influences also need to be differentiated from life stages. Young people sometimes think and act differently from their elders simply because they are young and not because they have spent their ‘formative years’ being influenced by the tides of history. In other instances, the attitudes and behaviour of young and old alike will shift in a similar direction (and perhaps to a similar degree) because both have been exposed to and affected by the same historical forces and events. We must be careful not to describe all members of a given birth cohort in terms of traits and tendencies that may apply to only a relatively small percentage of them.

Despite unhelpful generational descriptions, generations, particularly as a birth cohort have sociological significance. Esle writes,

For all that generations are hard to pin down, to write about them is more than an exercise in hair-splitting intellectual and cultural history. They are closely bound up with politics and economics – that is to say, with the distribution of power and resources in a given society. Generations can have considerable coercive power once they have taken shape as distinct social constituencies or interest groups. If your age marks you out as a member of the youth cohort, it is hard to avoid being treated as a ‘young person’.²³

What does this look like when it comes to church and some of our dominant models of youth ministry? One implication is an age segregated approach to ministry and mission to young people. Young people become separated out from the life of the wider church. This segregation can extend to young adults as well. But eventually the expectation is that young people integrate into the “adult” church.

But such a model is representative of what Mark DeVries calls *orphaning structures*, that include schools, scouts and girls brigade.²⁴ They provide support as long as a person fits the particular age group. When a person leaves an orphaning structure – or, in a church context, what is referred to as the segregation of religion by age – they can feel confused, lost, disconnected and begin their search to look for a new place to belong. This is what I describe as the ‘stage of life disconnect.’

Unfortunately, many churches have been more effective in providing young people with the orphaning structure of the youth group than to the lifelong nurturing structure of the church community. Ben Patterson has argued that,

It is a sad fact of life that often the stronger the youth program in the church, and the more the young people in the church identify with it, the weaker the chances are that those same young people will remain in the church when they grow too old for the youth program. Why? Because the youth program has become a substitute for participation in the church...When the kids outgrow the youth program, they also outgrow what they have known of the church.²⁵

Research tells us that young people who have at least one adult or more actively involved in their life do better than those who do not. Even those who come from at risk situations or difficult home environments do better and are more resilient if they have the care and support of at least one adult.

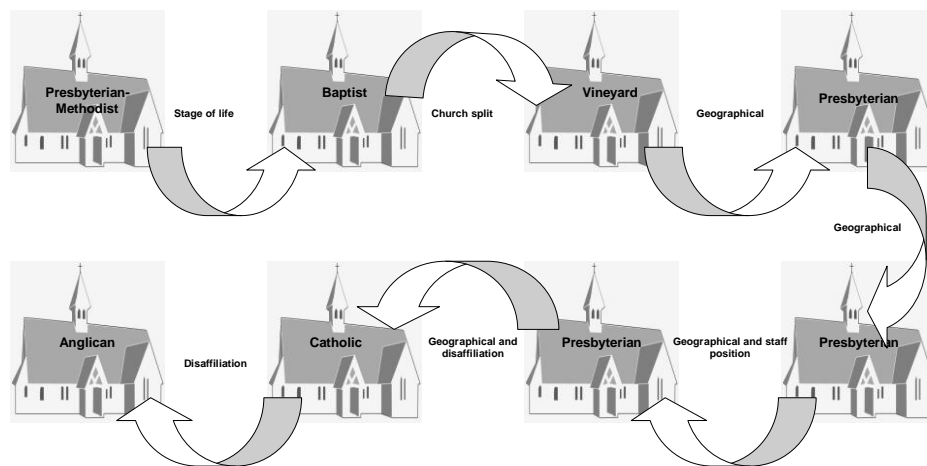
Youth ministry is a very important and strategic way to reach young people. But we need to be facilitating the forming and building of relationships between adults and young people. A study done by the Uniting Church of Australia documented the long-term impact of age-segregation within church life. What the researchers found was that children/young people who grew up in church attending the worship service and not Sunday school were more likely to be involved in church as adults than those young people who had attended youth group/Sunday school but not the worship service.²⁶

A number of the young adults I interviewed for my research experienced what we can describe as a ‘stage of life disconnect’ whereby they felt they out grew a church – or no longer connected to their church that they had previously felt connected to as they entered into a new stage of life. Some would go looking for a church with other young people, but then experience a disconnect from church as they became a young adult. Research demonstrates that young people who have at least one or two significant relationships with adults within a church community are more likely to continue on in their faith and as a contributing member of their church. Research also shows that young people in general

do better when they have significant relationships with adults than those who do not; including more at risk young people.

All of the young adults I interviewed valued community, but for a number of them community was elusive – just when they felt like they had found it, it change and they lost a sense of connection and belonging. This can lead to a high religious mobility which is intensified by New Zealand’s high geographic mobility – one of the highest in the world. This graph here shows the number of churches that participants have belonged to. Only two have belonged to one church all their life. The majority have belonged to five or more.

Theo’s Church Switching History

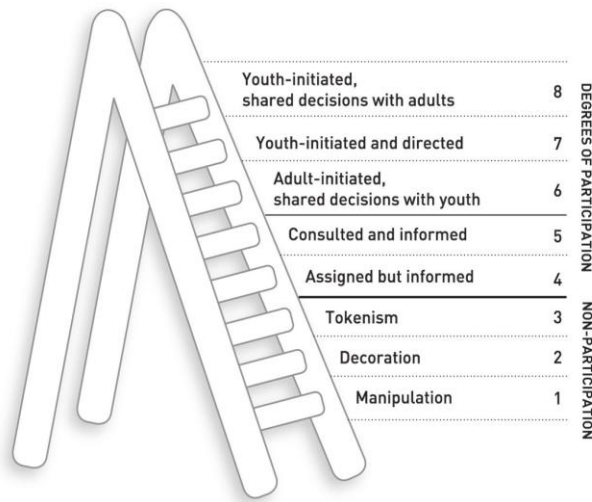


The diagram above is Theo’s *church switching history* that at the time of interviewing consists of eight churches. We can now add another two to this history both as the result of geographical moves. There are six different denominations that are part of Theo’s church history. There is a stage of life move when he went looking for a church that had more young people in it. A couple of moves were due to disillusionment and feeling burnt by senior leadership. The geographical moves result in seasonal belonging where a person belongs to a church for as long as they are in the area. This suggests a certain level of commitment and that people take changing churches seriously.

Youth participation

It is important to include young people in the decision making process of church life and mission decisions. The diagram below is called ‘Hart’s ladder’²⁷ is a useful way of assessing the extent that young people are participating within the life of a church or mission organisation.

HART'S LADDER



The bottom three rungs of the ladder, manipulation, decoration and tokenism, are all practices of non-participation. Then as we move up the ladder there are different forms of youth participation from adult-led initiatives with youth involvement to youth initiated and directed initiatives.

One radical example²⁸ of youth/young adult participation in action, at least for a Presbyterian Church, was when Paul Prestige, a Minister at St James New Plymouth, who presented a paper entitled 'Passing on the Baton' to his session (made up of 16 elders) to corporately step aside in order for a new session made up of seven or eight 30-somethings. The rationale was to give the leadership of the church over to a new and younger generation of elders. Inspiringly, this is exactly what they did.

Reflexive Ecclesiology.

One way for churches to evaluate their congregations' faith maturity and knowledge as well as discovering how many within the congregation are connecting or disconnecting with religious practices, such as preaching, is to engage in 'reflexive monitoring of their situation'²⁹ (Carroll, 2000, 554). Jackson Carroll calls this 'reflexive ecclesiology'. Reflexive ecclesiology is to reflect on church practices, such as preaching, worship, the structure of the church service, or how inclusive of young people a church might be and incorporate collective knowledge of congregational engagement into the reflection and change one's practices accordingly. Reflexive ecclesiology can also be used for reflecting on mission practices of a church or mission organisation.

Snapshots of the spiritual landscape

In light of my earlier qualifiers about generational descriptions, I now present some snapshots of the spiritual landscape and environment for emerging generations. In *Making Sense of Generation Y: The worldview of 15-25- year-olds*, Savage (et al) wanted to discover the extent to which young people from Gen Y make sense of themselves and

their world through the popular arts.³⁰ One of their assumptions was that young people are open to an advert spiritual search, something similar to Augustine's saying, "You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You"³¹. From their interviews with young people the authors argue that there is a coherent narrative that underpins young peoples worldviews, which they call the 'happy midi-narrative' whose storyline is simply put, 'this world and all life in it, is meaningful *as it is*'³². It is about the here and now of young people's lives. What is worth noting is that within this happy midi-narrative there is no place for God, sin, or even fear of death. Augustine's premise (dictum) is reworked, "We are busy making ourselves, and if we are restless, well that's just the way life is."³³ (Horder, 2007, 80).

These findings have implications for mission. What this research (and a large scale one in Australia)³⁴ suggests is that we have exaggerated the extent of interest of young people in spirituality in our society. Where do we begin our engagement with those who have no interest in anything transcendent? The gap between church and young people is growing. In order to understand and journey with young people we need to listen to what they are saying with thoughtfulness and intentionality. One of the starting places is building relationships with young people where they are and on their own terms – but also leading them towards an understanding of God.

Moral Therapeutic Deism

Christian Smith suggests that the actual functional faith of most teenagers in the U.S. is something that he calls 'Moral Therapeutic Deism'. It consists of five basic ideas:

³⁵(Smith, 2006,64):

- 1) A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
- 2) God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- 3) The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- 4) God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when he is needed to resolve a problem.
- 5) Good people go to heaven when they die.

Moral Therapeutic Deism is, first, about a moralistic approach to life. Essential to living a happy life is being a moral person – a nice, kind and responsible person. Secondly it is also about providing therapeutic benefits to believers. Finally the deism represents the specific kind of God believed in: God in this faith is thought of as normally distant from everyday life, existing "up there" and so not interfering with daily existence, except when called upon.³⁶ (2006, 65). I'm not sure how much transfers onto a New Zealand context. The religious landscape of America is vastly different to here. But some of it holds, possibly minus the belief in the existence of God, given that 30% of New Zealanders describe themselves as having no religion.

Moral Therapeutic Deism is orientated towards functionality resonating with instrumentalist tendencies. This faith is attractive because it is useful; it helps accomplish important things for its adherents. 'It solves problems. It helps people be nice to each other. It provides inner peace and happiness' (Smith, 2006, 66). How many of you know people who send their children to church or to a church school in order for them to receive some sort of moral grounding and good values, but are not interested in God?

What it does, Smith suggests, is set “up a consumerist mentality about religious faith that wants primarily to know ‘what can it do for me?’ not ‘what does it require of me?’”³⁷ I think sometimes we expect too little of our young people when it comes to faith and church participation. As a result their understanding of commitment to a faith community is diminished. Here is a quote from a 15 year old girl named Sally Rymer³⁸ that addresses this:

“Don’t sell my generation short
We can do more than play videogames...
Expect more out of us
Make us into disciples
Teach us spiritual practices
We need a compelling story to live into
Fire our imagination
Help us discover who we are and who God created us to be”

This is not about mission *to* young people, but rather mission *with* young people as we journey alongside them. The great commission is about making disciples. Sally’s plea calls us back to that challenge rather than creating outreach programs that might entertain or give young people an alternative on a Friday night but leads them no closer to knowing God. When we take the faith of young people seriously then we equip them to be witnesses to their own generation which flows out of a deep spirituality and sense of belonging to the people of God.

Endnotes

¹ Stanley, Brian. *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*. Eerdmans, 2009 p. 73

² Ross, Kenneth R. *Edinburgh 2010: Springboard Mission*. William Carey International University Press, 2010 p. 140

³ Cited in Barker, Chris. 2000. *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*. London: Sage. 407).

⁴ Hine, *Rise and Fall*, 4, 8-9; Kendra Creasy Dean, p. 79

⁵ By domestication Mead is arguing that the generation gap has lost its original importance and meaning from its expression in the 1960s perceived as part of larger social movements.

⁶ Generation X, like their generational predecessors, also graced the cover of *Time* (July 16, 1990) as “Twentysomethings”.

⁷ Fussell, Paul. *Class: A Guide through the American Status System*. New York: Simon and Schuster. 1983.

⁸ Coupland, Douglas. *Generation X’d*. <http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/gallery/5560/details1.html>. nd.

⁹ Ortner, Sherry. Generation X: Anthropology in a Media-Saturated World. *Cultural Anthropology*. 13 (3) 1998. P. 414-440.

¹⁰ Gross and Scott (1990, 57 cited Craig et al. 1997, 2) summarise early descriptions of GenX when they were predominantly in their twenties as ‘indecisive, lacking in ambition, and as having few heroes, no anthems, no style to call their own. They crave entertainment but their attention span is as short as one zap of a TV dial...They postpone marriage because they dread divorce...The possess only a hazy sense of their own identity but a monumental preoccupation with all the problems the preceding generation will leave for them to fix.’ ‘Early media coverage, Craig et al. observe, ‘was dominated by similar critical accounts of this new cohort’ (1997, 2).

¹¹ Coupland, Douglas. *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. Paperback ed. London: Abacus. 1996.

¹² Mannheim maintains that ‘If we speak simply of ‘generations’ without any further differentiation, we risk jumbling together purely biological phenomena and others which are the products of social and cultural

forces: thus we arrive at a sort of sociology of chronological tables (*Geschichtstabellensoziologie*), which uses its bird's-eye perspective to 'discover' fictitious generation movements to correspond to the crucial turning-points in historical chronology' (1952, 311).

¹³ Generation as *actuality* is evident in Gordon Lynch's (2002) argument that Generation X is an *attitude*, a particular view of the world, and Beaudion's (1998) suggestion that Generation X is *cultural* rather than being simply chronological.

¹⁴ Mannheim argues that any two generations following one another always fight different opponents both within and without resulting in an entirely different primary orientation (1952, 299). He also distinguishes the phenomena of memory and experience.

¹⁵ Beaudoin, Tom. *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 1998. P. 28. Beaudion's argument that engagement with popular culture is a defining characteristic of GenX is questionable. See Strauss et al. (2006) who explore GenY's engagement with popular culture.

¹⁶ Ross, Alex. Generation Exit. *The New Yorker*, April 25, 1994. P 102-102.

¹⁷ Hudson.. *The Generational Mirage? A Pilot Study into the Perceptions of Leadership by Generation X and Y*. White Paper Report. 2006. p. 26.

¹⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁹ Craig, Stephen C., and Stephen Earl Bennett. *After the Boom: The Politics of Generation X, People, Passions, and Power*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. 1997.

²⁰ Hooper, Danica. 2006. 'Generation Y: Attracting, Engaging and Leading a New Generation at Work. Drake. Auckland.; Hudson. 2006. *The Generational Mirage? A Pilot Study into the Perceptions of Leadership by Generation X and Y*. Auckland,] University Business School.. 2006. *The Generational Mirage*, argues that generational differences in the workplace are overstated and as others have found divergence between generational attitudes is more related to life-cycle phases than divergent generational values as such. The study found that Boomers and GenXers are not dissimilar as employees. There are more similarities than differences.

²¹ Ladd, Everett Carll. 1994. The Twentysomethings: 'Generation Myths' Revisited. *The Public Perspective* 5 (2):14-18; Ladd, Everett Carll. 1994. The Twentysomethings: 'Generation Myths' Revisited. *The Public Perspective* 5 (2):14-18; Wuthnow, Robert. 2007. *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty-and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

²² Ladd, Everett Carll. The Twentysomethings: 'Generation Myths' Revisited. *The Public Perspective* 5 (2):14-18. 1994.

²³ Esler, Anthony. *The Youth Revolution: The Conflict of Generations in Modern History*. Lexington: Heath. 1974. p. 5.

²⁴ DeVries, Mark. *Family-Based Youth Ministry*. Downer Groves: IVP. 2004. p.87

²⁵ *Ibid* . p 88

²⁶ *Ibid*. p. 102

²⁷ Roger A. Hart, 'Children's Participation: From Tokenism to Citizenship. Unicef, 1992.

²⁸ Paul Prestidge, 'Passing on the baton,' in *Candor*, issue 5, June 2010

²⁹ Carroll, Jackson. 2000. Reflexive Ecclesiology: A Challenge to Applied Research in Religious Organizations. *Journal for the Study of Religion* 39 (4): p 554

³⁰ Savage, Sara, Sylvia Collins-Mayo, Bob Mayo, and Graham Cray. 2006. *Making Sense of Generation Y: The World View of 15-25 Year Olds*. London: Church House.

³¹ Horder, John. 2007. Book review, 'Making Sense of Generation Y: The World View of 15-25 Year Olds,' *Journal of Youth and Theology* vol. 6, no. 2. P 79

³² Savage, Sara, Sylvia Collins-Mayo, Bob Mayo, and Graham Cray. 2006. *Making Sense of Generation Y: The World View of 15-25 Year Olds*. London: Church House. P 37.

³³ Horder, John. 2007. Book review, 'Making Sense of Generation Y: The World View of 15-25 Year Olds,' *Journal of Youth and Theology* vol. 6, no. 2. P 80.

³⁴ Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton, and Ruth Webber. 'The Spirituality of Young Australians,' *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 12 (2):149 – 163, 2007

³⁵ Smith Christian. 2006. 'Is Moralistic Therapeutic Deism the New Religion of American Youth? Implications for the Challenge of Religious Socialization and Reproduction,' in *Passing on the Faith:*

Transforming Traditions for the Next Generation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, ed James Heft. New York: Fordham University Press. P 64.

³⁶ *Ibid* p 65

³⁷ *Ibid* p 62.

³⁸ From Mike King's presentation, 'Presence Centered Youth Ministry,' Wellington NZ, 2010.

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