

"SECULAR SPIRITUALITY": THE WORLD OF YOUNG AUSTRALIANS

Wed 17 April 2013



Last time I suggested that the disengagement we see between young Australians and the church does not mean that young people are not spiritual. Indeed they are. It is just that they think of spirituality differently to the way that we have become accustomed to describing it.

The dominant part of this group embraces what has been termed a secular spirituality. While acknowledging the potential oxymoron in speaking of a secular spirituality, it is marked by the value that is placed on this-worldly rather than other-worldly aims, aspirations and understandings of the world.

In sketching a portrait of what a this-worldly life looks like we may be struck by its ordinariness. Similarly, the absence of key aspects that have been assumed to be part of a spiritual life is surprising.

On the one hand ordinary activities such as eating, drinking, dressing, communicating and working are present in a young person's life. These are activities that people have been doing for millennia. Yet the thing that gives coherence or meaning to these activities is not sought in a being or force that exists 'above' the material plain.

For many young people coherence is found in concepts such as an 'ethical life' or the fulfilment of 'personal aspirations'. It is the people, associations and things that reside in this material world that operate to bring some sense of coherent meaning to the various activities of life. Therefore to approach young people assuming an understanding of transcendence based on an other-worldly 'being' or 'force' misses the basic sources of meaning in a young person's life.

Yet we may perceive a transcendence of sorts based on a thoroughly materialistic and hedonistic lifestyle. Even self-pursuit can at a very basic level be argued to form a story that ties the different experiences of life together with some sense of meaning.

Within this secular spiritual arena scepticism regarding the truth claims of what have come to be held as 'personal beliefs' is high. This is particularly seen as the 'personal' and subjective elements of faith are contrasted with what is regarded as the 'hard' knowledge of materialism. Therefore claims of spiritual truth that turn aside from the strictly material world accessed by sensory information are rejected in favour of those that make sense individually but hold no sway over anyone else. This means that the universal, over-arching story, or 'meta-narrative', of an explicitly transcendent worldview is replaced by the 'midi-narrative' of a localised, personal story of coherence.

Young people place significant value on immediate relational networks to provide the reinforcement and support required to develop frameworks of meaning, even if these networks consist of people living at a great distance.

Authoritative institutions such as the Christian churches and an authoritative book such as the Bible are generally downplayed or rejected by young people. The immediate, this-worldly and interactive realm of human relationship exerts a powerful stimulus to the development of meaning. Consequently meaning forms around this-worldly pursuits and aspirations.

In the next few blogs I will explore the various forces that shape young people and the way they express themselves spiritually in the here-and-now.

Coming up next: The forces that shape young people: Individualisation.

*This blog uses material adapted from Matt's book 'Engage! How the church can reconnect with young people' which is published by Barton Books.
<http://www.bartonbooks.com.au/books/engage.htm> or +61 2 6272 6262*

By **Matt Brain**

Comments

As a young person I appreciated the non-judgmental and understanding tone of this article. The idea that spirituality means something different but not necessarily less to many young Australians was interesting. The idea of a spirituality which doesn't need to apply to others around us also resonated with my experiences. We perhaps find new challenges in our increasingly multicultural and multi-faith social ties.

Made by Claire on Wed 17 April 2013

Thanks Matt. This resonates with the theory that secularism has led to 'disenchantment' and towards a sentimentalist understanding of values (ie morality is a product of the human mind). See for example: <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2011/01/07/disenchantment-and-the-mind-dependence-of-the-moral/>

Made by Jeremy Halcrow on Wed 17 April 2013

Matt, I think much of what you write here describes at least the last generation of young people... It was certainly emerging when I stopped fulltime youth work in 1996. Has it evolved further? I can see glimpses of evolution in terms of iGen issues around connection it what about the spirituality spawned in the last decade?

It just occurs to me that many aging Xers would agree with what you have described here as describing them... And maybe their teenage kids have shifted again??

Made by Geoff Broughton on Wed 17 April 2013