

POSTCONCILIAR CATHOLICS: GENERATION X AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Abstract

The term Generation X describes a group that is now well into adulthood. Generation X Catholics are also the first postconciliar generation, meaning that the Second Vatican Council did not have a strong personal impact on them. One way of gaining a greater understanding of Generation X Catholics is to investigate some of their adolescent experiences. A constant factor in the lives of many adolescents in the late 1970s and 1980s was their experience of religious education within the wider context of Catholic secondary schools. Generation X Catholics experienced religious education that lacked academic focus but they did not have a negative view of their time in Catholic schools. Generation X valued this time but they remain uncommitted about their involvement in the church. This has implications for those who work with Generation X Catholics, a dominant population cohort in Catholic education.

What do we mean by Generation X? An Overview.

Social commentators have coined the term *Generation X* to describe the population cohort that followed the baby boomers (Coupland, 1991). The precise chronological boundaries of Generation X are difficult to define. If we understand baby boomers to be those born in the immediate post Second World War Two period then those born after 1960 can claim to be a new generation. By a similar logic then, Generation X would not apply to those born after 1975. The precise parameters of Generation X are not critical but the understanding in this paper is that it comprises those individuals aged between 25 and 40. The characteristics of Generation X are the subject of a sizeable literature and this section is not intended to be a thorough review, rather it provides an overview of the field making a number of points that will be followed up in later discussion.

The features of Generation X are often contrasted with those of their parents (Dunn, 1993). Whereas the baby boomers were the products of a self confident and outward looking culture, Generation X came to maturity in a time of relative social introspection (Roof, 1993). Whilst their parents were often involved in a deliberate rebellion against societal and parental norms, Generation X had before them a number of options and a degree of freedom in choosing what course their lives would take. Indeed Mackay (1997) describes those born in the 1970s as the *options generation*. One area where this freedom is exemplified is in the area of personal morality and relationships. Generation X is marked, for example, by a relative lack of conviction in marriage as a lifelong and exclusive bond yet remain open to a variety of ongoing relationships. Mackay describes this type of thinking as synonymous with being a *moral boundary rider*, that is, being uncomfortable with any prescriptive rule that can be seen to reduce the

options available whilst retaining a moral sense (Mackay, 1997, p. 146). Having options brings with it freedom from commitment and obligation and can also produce a parallel decrease in ideological conviction. This can, again, be contrasted with the baby boomers whose coming of age in the sixties, a time of strong and often conflicting social and moral visions, was marked by strong ideological concerns (Barna, 1994). Generation X is generally suspicious of ideology and institutional authority and places far more emphasis on the importance of human experience (Beaudoin, 1998). Generation X is also typified by a relative uncertainty about the future conditioned by a perception that the seemingly endless prosperity of the post war years has ended. (Howe & Straus, 1993).

Generation X: Postconciliar Catholics

Generation X Catholics can also be understood by drawing a distinction between them and earlier generations. The point of discrimination is the impact of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). The Council was a watershed in the history of Catholicism in the twentieth century (Stacpoole, 1986). Generation X was not greatly affected by the Council because their experience of Catholic culture, as exemplified by Catholic schooling, was postconciliar. For earlier generations, however, the Council had far more impact. Powerful descriptions of growing up in either the preconciliar period or the era characterised by the transition between preconciliar and postconciliar practices form an important part of the social history of Catholicism in Australia as well as in other western societies (Massam, 1996). Being part of a wider all-embracing social network was a characteristic feature of Catholic life in the preconciliar period and this certainly has a major impact on adolescents growing up in this environment. (Campion, 1982; Dwyer & English 1990; Moloney 1996). One of the most critical events for Catholic baby boomers was their reaction to this enculturation in the light of the

conciliar reforms. The transition from a preconiliar to postconciliar mentality was often marked by struggles that could carry on well into mature adulthood before some type of resolution was reached. The *reconstruction* of belief and behaviour took place when strong challenges to what had been taught and accepted occurred (Rymarz, 1999). A strong metaphor for the process of reconstruction is the image of moving out of the metaphorical Catholic *ghetto*. Acceptance of Catholic belief and practices for many older Catholics was not an autonomous choice in much the same way the child does not choose to be born within a ghetto. Moving out of a ghetto, even if this is because the walls have suddenly crumbled, brings with it change which can be very difficult to cope with especially when it is unexpected. The suddenness and urgency of many of the postconciliar changes partly explains the profound effect reconstruction had on many Catholic baby boomers.

Outside the Ghetto

Generation X Catholics lack this experience of transition and reconstruction. This profoundly affects their understanding and expression of religious faith and places a distance between them and earlier generations. Generation X Catholics have little knowledge of the cohesive Catholic culture of the preconiliar world or to put it another way have had minimal experience of living inside the Catholic ghetto. This created a *generation gap* between them and older Catholics. We see similar generational tensions in other religious traditions' response to significant change. In modern Judaism, for example, one key event was the break down of actual Jewish ghettos instigated by Napoleon in the nineteenth century (Kung, 1991). In Western Europe these ghettos had existed for centuries and the legal protection offered by the new Civil Code was an enormous liberation for Jews who could now live freely and safely in nondenominational areas.

One of the unexpected effects of the collapse of the ghettos, however, was a profound experiential distance that emerged between those who had lived in the ghettos and younger Jews who had no direct experience of this (Rudavsky, 1967). Obviously the experience of moving away from an actual ghetto is a far more powerful experience than the collapse of the metaphorical Catholic ghetto in the postconciliar period. This language does, nonetheless, give us a metaphor for understanding the difference in perspective of Generation X Catholics, who were never inside the walls so to speak, when compared to older Catholics who saw the walls suddenly disappear.

Generation X and the Experience of Catholic Culture

Generation X Catholics were subtly affected by the changes that were occurring in the wider church

when they were attending secondary schools. The impact that the Council had on Catholic life is beyond the scope of this article but two points with special relevance to Generation X will be made. Firstly, Catholic beliefs and teachings in the postconciliar period, especially in the area of morality and sexual ethics, were challenged in a way that was unimaginable before the Council (Hoyt, 1968; Uncombed, 1975).

There was also controversy about how fundamental disciplines such as scripture studies were to be approached. Fitzmyer (1986) has remarked that since the publication, in 1943, of *Divino Afflante Spiritu* by Pope Pius XII the Catholic approach to scripture studies has undergone a major shift.

This process was accelerated by the conciliar constitution, *Dei Verbum*. The changes, though, brought with them a certain amount of confusion about what exactly was the Catholic position on scripture. In such an atmosphere of uncertainty and controversy there was a strong incentive to present a vision of Catholicism that was uncontentious and avoided difficult issues.

A second feature of postconciliar Catholic life, greatly encouraged by the conciliar constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, was its emphasis on the harmony and continuity between the culture of the church and the wider culture. This was often at the expense of the distinctive features of Catholic belief and practice. Generation X Catholics, therefore, were brought up in an era where denominational differences seemed far less important than in earlier times. It was an era where the descriptor 'Catholic' was used less and less frequently.

This was a trend repeated across the Western world (Greeley, 1985). The popular expression of Catholicism in this period is difficult to characterise, especially when compared to the preconiliar period, and is often best understood by a description of what was absent. For example, the practice of first Rite of Reconciliation all but disappeared, popular expressions of piety such as sodalities organised around confessional lines also became far less popular and visible and Catholic political hegemony was greatly weakened (O'Farrell, 1985).

These and other cultural expressions of Catholicism that had provided earlier generations with a connection and an entree into the adult Catholic life, albeit a relatively unreflective one, were not available for Generation X Catholics. Like their contemporaries, with whom they felt a strong kinship, Generation X Catholics constructed an identity that was far more responsive to the needs of the individual as opposed to a collective or communal meaning (Loeb, 1994). They were also

suspicious of authority and the idea of an unquestioned magisterial church was not even a memory.

Generation X Catholics as Adolescents

A greater understanding of Generation X Catholics can be reached by investigating some of their formative experiences. This places some significant challenges before the researcher because many of these experiences are not powerful. To ask a thirty-year old Catholic about their experiences as an adolescent often evokes a far weaker response than the same question asked of a fifty-year-old. This is one of the reasons there is little published research in this area (Turner, 1994; Pirola, 1996). Generation X Catholics find it difficult to recall easily adolescent experiences that marked their enculturation into a religious tradition (Rymarz, 2000). In order to facilitate responses an appropriate common experience needs to be identified. One constant feature of the late 1970s and 1980s was the strong enrolment in Catholic secondary schools (Martin, 1983). Pivotal, at least in a rhetorical sense, was religious education which was a part of the school curriculum in some way at every year level for Catholic secondary schools.

By asking the Generation X Catholics to recall, specifically, their experiences of secondary school religious education and Catholic schooling in general some important insights can be gained about Generation X Catholics. This research has been reported in detail elsewhere (Rymarz, 2001). A number of significant points will be developed here to help characterise the formative experience of Generation X Catholics.

1. Lack of Academic Focus

One of the most dominant experiences of Generation X Catholics was the lack of educational focus of the religious education they received in secondary schools. This was seen as a subject without academic demands. Generation X Catholics have a relatively poor understanding of the content areas normally associated with religious education. An example of this was in the way sexuality was handled when Generation X were in Catholic secondary schools. Many Generation X Catholics remarked on the absence, confusion and the relatively poor educational content of teaching on sexuality when they were at secondary school.

2. Positive Experience of Catholic Schools

Generation X Catholics are likely to have had positive experiences of Catholic schools. They do not generally report feeling threatened and do not have hostile feelings about their time in Catholic secondary schools: they do not express widespread dissatisfaction with the religious education curriculum even if they recognise that it was not a

subject which made academic demands on them. This attitude was exemplified by responses that indicated that Generation X was happy with the package of Catholic education, that is the curriculum, the culture and atmosphere of the school and the relationships that were established there.

3. Importance of Experience

Some of the most significant experiences for Generation X Catholics in their time in secondary schools were activities which allowed them to develop relationships and fellowship with their peers. There were many positive comments about the culture of Catholic schools, that the school provided more than just an education – it was where they met their friends and shared significant experiences. For many Generation X Catholics their most dominant memory of secondary school was the retreat which was an emerging part of the whole school curriculum in this period.

Some Educational Implications

Beaudoin (1995) has remarked that a lack of interest in ideology and a general suspicion of *top down* authority typify Generation X. This attitude extends to all institutional forms of authority. For Generation X Catholics this includes a suspicion of the teachings and authority of the church. Importantly, however, is an underlying experience that is positive or at least not overtly hostile. Generation X Catholics are not reacting to their adolescent experiences of Catholicism. A better analogy would be that they are trying to make sense of them and in some cases incorporate them into their lives. Generation X Catholics are much more likely to be *constructing* as opposed to *reconstructing* religious meaning and identity (Rymarz, 1999).

The process of construction is often an eclectic one, typified by a lack of an overarching or sustaining philosophical system. This eclecticism has been referred to as a religious commitment which is highly personal where the individual makes choices about what is appropriate for him or her often without reference to formal teaching (English, 1999). An analogy here is one of a cafeteria, where customers choose the dishes that appeal to them and leave those which are not palatable.

Generation X Catholics lack sophisticated knowledge of content areas, such as theology, scripture and philosophy that are normally associated with religious inculturation. This has at least two important implications for the educational and inservice needs of Generation X Catholics. Firstly, it is important not to make assumptions about the level of content knowledge that Generation X Catholics possess. Educators who are working with Generation X Catholics would be well

advised to ascertain the level of knowledge of the group before they begin the presentation or course. Secondly, this lack of content knowledge brings with it an openness to new understanding that is unencumbered by the type of reconstruction undertaken by earlier generations. Generation X Catholics are not hostile but share the reluctance of their generation to embrace wholeheartedly all encompassing philosophical or moral systems.

The ambivalence of Generation X is often manifested in a reluctance to make a commitment and it is important to recognise that this does have a negative side (Lipsky & Abrams, 1994). It can make Generation X Catholics, like their peers, observers rather than participants in a variety of activities. Most importantly, perhaps, is the effect it has on their perception of how much control they have over their own lives (Cohen, 1993). Mackay's notion of Generation X as moral boundary riders does carry with it a sense of unease. Being on the boundary is not a desirable place to be for a long period of time. Whilst you are on the boundary the real action is talking place without your direct involvement. This can lead to a life that is lived in the future – in the sense that – *I won't get involved now, I will wait till the situation is clearer, I can't commit to this*. This kind of sentiment becomes less and less sustainable as a person matures (Mahedy & Bernardi, 1994). The oldest Generation X Catholics are now approaching middle age and the absence of commitment to a sustaining life philosophy that is manifested in the way a person lives and in the relationships they form could become an issue for educators working with this age level. Whereas the educator may wish to focus on relatively specific and practical issues, some Generation X Catholics may be far more interested in bigger questions, ones that address significant life issues that are now major concerns of theirs.

The search for meaning by Generation X Catholics is also one that is typical of the age group in as much as it is a search that begins with experience, which is valued over ideology. Those working with Generation X Catholics must try to ensure that the vision of Catholic life and culture that is presented is positive, welcoming and affirming and is lived out in a concrete way (Rochford, 2001). Only if a suitable praxis is demonstrated will it have sustaining interest to Generation X Catholics. This is a challenge for the church because it places importance not on the level of rhetoric or argument but on the lived experience of Christian life. Generation X Catholics have a far more secular outlook which makes them much less dependent on the church to provide a context or meaning for the great questions of life. The attitude that looked exclusively to one source or authority to provide answers is much more indicative of *life in the*

ghetto. Generation X Catholics have had no experience of this and are far more familiar with the multifaceted reality that presents itself in a modern Western culture. If the church cannot provide meaningful answers then there are other belief systems which may be incorporated in a syncretistic fashion although there is a danger that this process can lack integrity.

The era which marked the adolescence and young adulthood of Generation X Catholics was a time still very much influenced by the unresolved debates that were initiated by the Second Vatican Council. A key question here is whether educators twenty or so years later are better placed to offer a sustaining vision that is able to engage Generation X Catholics? The advantage of working with people who are not, in a sense, reacting to prior knowledge or experience is a considerable one. An emphasis on the integrity of the message on an academic or intellectual plane as well as the importance of its transition into practice is a challenge for educators especially when the privileged positions in the church such as teacher and guide have been considerably weakened. It is, nonetheless, a challenge commensurate with one of the great themes of the conciliar reform, namely the dignity and freedom of the individual and one that should be embraced.

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