

A Spectral View of Contemporary Australian Youth Spiritualities & Evangelical Youth Ministry

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Abstract

This paper seeks to nuance the amorphous notion of contemporary Australian “youth spirituality” into a spectral range of overlapping yet distinct youth spiritualities. These different spiritualities are identified by reference to the tacit belief and practise characteristics of different approaches to meaning construction commonly found in Australian youth. It is hoped that this spectral view is of general interest, but this paper then moves to a specific youth ministry context and seeks to analyse what spirituality ‘colours’ Evangelical youth ministry typically targets, what colours it avoids and whether such an interface with different youth spiritualities is well theologically and culturally conceived.

Part One: A Spectral View of Contemporary Australian Youth Spiritualities

Methodology

Wilhelm Dilthey believed that any genuine understanding of human beings can only be had in the terms of distinctly *human* understanding. So Dilthey’s approach to the study of how people live together – his sociology – was deeply grounded in the intellectual disciplines of culture and meaning, otherwise known as the Humanities. In defiance of Comtean positivism, Dilthey held that reducing our understanding of society to only what a supposedly objective, scientific and quantifying grid can reveal about human behaviour and belief, is deeply inadequate.¹ Max Weber essentially agreed with Dilthey, but thought that understanding in distinctly Humanities term (*Verstehen*) can also be usefully combined with positivistic statistical data.

Whilst I agree with Weber, this paper bears more resemblance to Dilthey’s approach than to Weber’s. This paper seeks to understand “youth spirituality” in the Humanities terms of culture and meaning, rather than in the Social Science terms of quantifiable

behavioural and socio-statistical data. This paper seeks to grasp, from within, the spiritual quests of our youth. The new literature on “spirituality”, as well as the broader literature of Western cultural history, is the literary base of this paper, and my understanding of this learning is shaped by my own cultural immersion in the spiritual quests of the young people I have worked with as a Chaplain.

For four years, finishing in 2003, I was employed as a Christian secondary school Chaplain at Brisbane State High School. This is a secular state school, where the Chaplain is funded solely by voluntary parental donations. Each year I worked with a cohort of about 2000 twelve to seventeen year old students, male and female, from a broad range of urban Australian settings. Whilst most of my work was pastoral, my job also gave me considerable scope to discuss “deep and meaningful” concerns with these young people. In talking and praying with students, I was able to gain a strong affinity with the sorts of spiritual quests many of them were on.

I found no single youth spirituality, but rather a spectrum of exploratory spiritualities. Further, I found no generally accepted basic world view from which a coherent meaning for spirituality itself could be derived. Shared basic beliefs about God and spiritual reality are now so vague as to provide your average youth with no sense of certainty or solidity to beliefs of this nature. Communally supported practises of religious ritual and religiously horizoned morality are, where they exist at all, also typically vague and weightless. In this unusual sociological context – a context strikingly different to Australia 50 years ago – belief and practise fluidity, a mosaic and provisional approach to belief and practise construction, and an ease with incoherent pluralism, are normal. This is not a tidy research context.

So this paper employs something of a *Verstehen* methodology, and this search for understanding is informed by my immersion in a specific youth ministry context. In passing, I do draw from the literature of quantitative and qualitative social research,² but this paper in itself makes no pretensions to any statistical rigour.

Defining “Spirituality”

The big cultural shift towards “spirituality” that a growing body of literature has been documenting for the past 5 to 10 years, is clearly a shift away from the confident unbelief of scientific atheism.³ Yet, the term “spirituality” itself remains notoriously difficult to define. There may well be very good reasons why this so.

In John 1:3, the apostle teaches that the most basic reality underlying all creation is the divine *Logos*. In Acts 17:28, Saint Paul, quoting Epimenides, explains that it is in God that we live and move and have our being. A Christian understanding of the nature of reality finds “the spiritual” – in the divine Person of Christ – to be the ontic grounds of all material reality, and, more essentially, the transcendent grounds of personhood and meaning within created reality. Saint Paul is very clear about this in Colossians 1:15-20 and elsewhere. I take a Christian understanding of “the spiritual”, then, as referring to the humanly ineffable reality of transcendent love and meaning which is the divine ground of all created being. Hence, from within a distinctly Christian understanding of spirituality, we cannot stand over and define “spirituality” because the *Logos* (the spiritual) stands over and defines us. But in standing under (understanding) a revealed theology given to us from the divine grounds of all being, we can, in some meaningful manner, make sense of ourselves as spiritual embodied beings.

Contemporary scholarship does not, however, typically embed the notion of “spirituality” within a specific theological framework, as above. The term spirituality is typically used as a non-theologically framed sensibility descriptor that covers any experience or belief that is not believed by its subject to be reductively materialistic. Yet such a broad and loose concept of spirituality, extracted from tacit theological or metaphysical beliefs and viewed in isolation from specific approaches to the practise of life (be such practise moral and/or religious), tells us only that scientific atheism is now out of fashion. To find out anything more useful about “youth spirituality” one needs, I believe, to seek to identify what the specific underlying beliefs and practises of life that now flourish, actually are. So, to draw up a spectrum of different spiritualities detectable in contemporary Australian youth culture, is to describe the tacit underlying ‘theologies’ and ‘religious practises’ that separate out one colour in

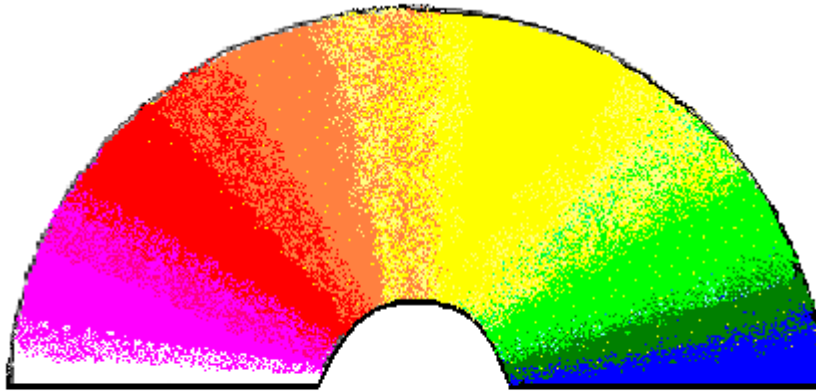
the spectrum from another. In order to make some tentative observations along these lines, this paper is forced to abandon the a-theological and a-religious concept of “spirituality”.

Underlying the assumptions governing the logic of this paper is my own Johannine commitment to a Christian understanding of what spirituality is (see John1:1-18). It is hoped that this reference point assists my understanding of different constructions of “spirituality” by giving me some theological and religious landmarks with which to compare and contrast the tacit theologies and religious practises I seek to uncover.

Distinguishing colours in the spectrum of contemporary youth spiritualities

The spectrum I observed as a Christian chaplain in a secular school context has modernist fundamentalism as a smallish blue band on the right. This is a conservative spirituality offering certainty, authoritative meaning and a clear moral framework in uncertain, nihilistic and immoral times. Next is the hypermodern. This is a large band extending from the right to the middle of the spectrum. To use a colour metaphor, if fundamentalism is blue and hypermodernism is yellow, then the spectrum shifts from a distinct blue to the right, through changing grades of green, to a distinct yellow towards the centre. The hypermodern is very comfortable in our contemporary consumer culture, and its “spirituality” is one of experience, choice and self actualisation. Next to hypermodernism comes relationalism. Relationalism is, to varying degrees, discontent with the atomisation, fragmentation and superficiality of consumer culture, and places high value on meaning derived from relationships. Where hypermodernism and relationalism overlap, you get orange, from the middle of the spectral band extending left, before a purer red of relationalism stands out clearly from hypermodernism, towards the left end of the spectrum. Then, moving through various shades of pink, relationalism merges with post-secularism until the white colour of radical post-secularism forms a thin band at the far left of the spectrum. Radical post-secular young people have no interest in modern certainty, reject hypermodern consumerism and yet want more than relationally orientated metaphysical unbelief. These young people have a theological and religious thirst for

spiritual water that reflects their sense of living in a very arid spiritual environment. They are typically highly critical of ‘church’.



In general terms, everything that is not dark blue in this spectrum is post-secular. That is, the dominance of the contesting meta-narratives of ‘progressive’ atheistic scientific naturalism and ‘conservative’ religious Biblical supernaturalism, played out according to the rules of some neutral, secular reason, has, for most of the West, simply gone. The USA is, in this regard, a-typical. As a powerful cultural influence on Australian life, the blue hues (and also the green, yellow and orange hues) apparent in Australian youth spirituality are typically strongly shaped by American cultural and religious influences. Yet, whilst a fundamentalist spirituality embedded in the secular contest between progressive atheism and conservative religious belief is probably now growing in Australia, it remains, from my observations, a relatively minor component on the spectrum of contemporary youth spiritualities.⁴ It does seem that a generalised and significant shift towards post-secularism has commenced that is unlikely to allow any serious revival of traditional secular forms of Protestant fundamentalism.⁵ This makes today’s cultural climate radically different to the typically modernist and secular environment of the 1960s and 70s, situated, as it was, in opposition to a residual Christian moral conservatism carried over from the 1950s. Even so, the contemporary shift towards the post-secular is still in its formative stage and we are yet to discover how this new seemingly religiously minimalist fascination with “spirituality” is going impact us. But the impact is likely to be profound. David Tacey predicts a revolutionary “post-secular enlightenment [that]... will challenge and

overturn many of the principles that have governed our society during [its] long secular period.”⁶

Yet, my sense is that very few of our youth have any clear awareness of the revolutionary potential of post-secularity itself. For this reason, I have put post-secularism as a distinct colour of contemporary youth spirituality at the far edge of that spectrum.

We will now examine each colour in the spectrum more closely.

Fundamentalist Youth Spirituality

The appeal of certainty in increasingly uncertain times is, according to the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, what makes Western “fundamentalism” a distinctly post-modern religious phenomena.⁷ This is a very interesting observation that bears close examination, even though Bauman is no theologian or historian of Evangelical Christianity, and so uses the term “fundamentalism” in an embarrassingly loose and generalised manner.



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If one sees postmodernism as a crisis of confidence in modern approaches to truth, then Protestant fundamentalism still has that Enlightenment framed confidence in the knowability of truth – via its science of Biblical exegesis – and is hence not postmodern. Indeed the two chief enemies of Protestant fundamentalism are atheistic scientific modernism, with its alternative view of truth, and any type of postmodernism, with its abandonment of universal and propositional truth itself. Ironically, the belief certainty and unquestioning commitment to the warrants of its own authority structures characteristic of

positivistic atheism is just, in those terms, as fundamentalist as Protestant

fundamentalism. Typically the term “fundamentalist” is used by progressive intellectuals like Bauman to bemoan the fading of intellectual openness and liberal civility they associate with their own positivistic outlook, in the face of the return of a more or less barbaric pre-modern religious superstitions. Even so, Bauman is right, the broad cultural crisis of dependable truth can re-invigorate simple and absolutist concepts of religious authority, and “fundamentalism” appeals to people looking for a dependable authority in a world of rapidly diminishing belief certainty.

Fundamentalist students that I met were typically from conservative Protestant Evangelical families, or they were converts to Pentecostal Christianity, typically from non-religious families. As Pentecostal fundamentalism fits more easily into the green category of my spectrum, I will leave it out here.

Practising Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christian youths, and devout Orthodox Jewish and Islamic youths, superficially look like Protestant fundamentalists in that they hold religious beliefs very strongly and believe in the authority base of those beliefs absolutely. Yet, whilst they may be “fundamentalists” in the generic sense of upholding absolute belief commitments, their beliefs and mode of believing are clearly very different to Protestant fundamentalism (fundamentalism proper).

Fundamentalism is a term that a distinct branch of Evangelical Protestants gave to themselves, and this term has a very specific historical, doctrinal and methodological meaning.⁸ Most importantly, fundamentalism is a specific reactionary attempt of Enlightenment framed Evangelical Christianity to denounce Liberal Protestant theology, and to denounce modern science as wrong when it contradicts the literalist reading of the Bible that is the authority base for fundamentalist certainty.⁹ As Evangelical Christianity was formed in the 18th century,¹⁰ the progressive cultural ethos of 18th century Enlightenment – dismissal of tradition, rejection of superstition, embracing the promise of science, pushing for political and economic reform towards greater individual freedom, and an ease of association with infant nationalism – had a strong influence on how Evangelicals interpreted the Bible. That is, Evangelical Christianity has typically had a very modernist, nominalist, and Enlightenment framed understanding of Biblical truth. Clearly, Catholic, Orthodox, Jewish and Islamic thinking has never been as tied to an Enlightenment hermeneutic of Scripture as

Evangelical Christianity is. Protestant fundamentalism is hence a distinctly Western and modernist form of religious faith. Protestant fundamentalism is thus, in many regards, very unlike generically “fundamentalist” non-Protestant religious faith, that is called “fundamentalist” simply because, in common with Protestant fundamentalism, the faith of its adherents has not been relativised and dismissed by either modern truth or postmodern doubt. Importantly, generic non-Protestant “fundamentalism” is strikingly less committed to a secularistic understanding of the individual and the community than fundamentalism proper, and hence, the self evident virtues of modern liberal democratic politics are often not taken as simply given to generic “fundamentalists”, and this can be used to describe them as “religious extremists”.¹¹

Devout Australian youths of committed non-Protestant religious belief are – though historically often shaped by pre-secular beliefs and practises – more akin to the post-secular non-Enlightenment framed end of the youth spirituality spectrum that I am seeking to sketch than to the fundamentalist end of the spectrum. So we will leave them, too, out of this distinctly modernist and Western description of fundamentalist youth spirituality.

Protestant fundamentalism is a modernist island of certainty in a sea of postmodern uncertainty. It has a ghetto mentality, fending off the waves of relativistic and immoral uncertainty in the surrounding community. It has an embattled mentality, at war with the invading marines of atheistic science and worldly hedonism who are ever attacking its cherished truths through the relentless materialistic and ‘progressive’ bias of the dominant knowledge and education discourses of our day, and through the hedonism of the mass media. Moreover, explicitly fundamentalist Protestant churches are, as embattled ghettos, often very close knit. In the socially atomised and inherently relationally insecure context of the broader society, this level of communal bondedness has a strong potential appeal to outsiders. However, the line between ‘strong religiously bonded community with an emphasis on authoritarian dogmatic certainty’ and ‘cult’ is not easily drawn by the dominant liberal norms of our society, and the more conscious of being ‘not of the world’ fundamentalists are, the more likely to be seen as a dangerous cult they are.

This sort of fundamentalism is much more at home, and much more main stream, in the USA than it is in Australia.¹² But the powerful cultural influence of the USA on Australian Evangelicals makes the line between hard core fundamentalist Evangelicalism and theologically conservative Evangelicalism rather porous, and it gives Evangelicals of a right wing bias (probably the majority of Australian Evangelicals) a degree of comfort and boldness as being aligned with one of the world's most powerful political interest groups – the Religious Right of America. Marion Maddox notes how a doctrinally watered down ‘copy cat’ civic religion, of an American Religious Right flavour, has been imported from the USA into mainstream conservative Australian politics, with the very pro-US post-9/11 politics of fear.¹³

Fundamentalist spirituality is not main stream in Australian religion, and the Religious Right is nothing like as politically significant in Australia as in the USA; yet, as insecurity and an embattled hard line defiance of an ever present covert threat (uncertainty) becomes an increasingly dominant features of our national political landscape, soft fundamentalism is now a viable force to be politically harnessed. Yet, beyond Bauman's analysis, it seems to me that generic fundamentalism – the search for belief solidity – need not be defined by a merely reactionary fundamentalist dogmatism and a xenophobic outlook to the non-Western “other”, or by superstitious absolutism. Non-Protestant and non-Western faith traditions outside of the modern/postmodern belief crisis of Western culture, are becoming a source of increasing fascination to Western people. For the certainty of faith need not be framed in either modern or postmodern terms. Indeed, it may even be the case that the certainty of faith can only be defined in non modern and non postmodern terms.¹⁴

Hypermodern Youth Spirituality

I am using the word “hypermodern” here to describes the combination of culturally postmodern beliefs with very modern practises of life.¹⁵ Distinctly modern practises of life are those ways of being in the world that are comfortably embedded in modern consumer capitalism, technological innovation, mass media saturation, high mobility, adaptation to transition, complex and changing identity construction etc. The dominant behavioural norms of our modern way of life are typically pragmatic, materialistic, instrumental, bureaucratically controlled, and posit strong lines of

separation between the inner personal world of beliefs and values, and the outer public world of actions and legality. Culturally postmodern beliefs have, as described by academics like Lyotard,¹⁶ simply abandoned the need for a coherent overall metanarrative of truth and universal meaning. The hypermodern is thus a marriage of the modern – without the modernist belief in truth – and the postmodern – without any interest in the critique of modern power or social life forms.

Unlike modernist fundamentalism, hypermodernism is not philosophically realist, yet neither is it explicitly anti-realist. Philosophers call this irrealism.¹⁷ Professor Harry G. Frankfurt identifies this sort of outlook very closely with the social dominance of advertising in our contemporary cultural world.¹⁸ Baudrillard's concept of the "hyper-real", taken up by Zizek, links this hypermodern outlook not only with marketing, but with an interest in replacing reality altogether by crafted experiences delivered to us by the mass media.¹⁹ Whether something is real or not is simply not an issue, its whether something gratifies one's desires that is important. If a young person has a desire for meaning and significance, and a church offers to satisfy that desire, then the youth may well check it out in order to see if the experience of meaning offered is any good or not. This religious openness, from the stance of hypermodern irrealism, has no particular concern for whether the meaning offered is in some sense true or not. Also in sympathy with the egocentric and individualist nature of the consumer experience, such a seeker is unlikely to hold much "brand loyalty" to any particular church or creed unless an identity of belonging to the logo can be successfully crafted. Some Evangelical churches – particularly large Pentecostal churches with a "prosperity doctrine" emphasis²⁰ – excel in creating a positive identity experience for "spiritual" seekers comfortable with the hypermodern world. These churches create a richly textured entertainment environment, replete with moving emotional experiences, using state of the art information technology, their own distinctive appropriation of contemporary music, and often, by selling appropriate fashion accessories. In Australia, the church that most strikingly succeeds in attracting this form of spiritual seeker is Hillsong.²¹ In our spectrum, Hillsong™ is bright neon yellow. Its website is of the highest corporate interactive quality, and if "perception is reality" – as marketing gurus are want to claim – then the worship experience you can get there leaves everything a church with less talent, money, resources and commitment to world best practise in media image, could possibly offer. More

generally, the mega-church movement in Australia taps into this hypermodern youth spirituality. You need big money and high quality performance talent to do this sort of church.

Due to the prevalence of images invested with identity meaning rather than substantive content (ie “branding”), due to high degrees of familiarity with exotic entertainment scapes, computer generated virtual reality environments, and advertising reality manipulation, an old fashioned scientific view of reality drawn from 19th century positivism, has experienced a more or less unconscious credibility collapse for many of our young people. So the degree to which fundamentalist views of Christian religion may clash with perceived scientific reality tends to be an issue for older people to bemoan or revel in, but it is hardly even an issue for youth.

However, the green overlap of modernist fundamentalism with hypermodern irrealism – often characteristic of the burgeoning Australian Pentecostal youth scene – appears to straddle these contradictory worlds with seeming ease. I think there are two sorts of explanations for this. On the one hand, Australian Pentecostalism and American culture are on intimate terms. The carry over of American pietistic religious experientialism into a culturally American high tech entertainment/marketing context is natural, and easily imported *in toto* to Australia, and so the doctrinal fundamentalism of politically conservative Evangelical Protestantism is often just part of the show. On the other hand, the tacit irrealism of consumer saturated youth culture, can actually sustain an environment of faith where the truth claims of the gospel grasp youth powerfully,²² in either an unreal manner, or even in something of an Augustinian realist manner, so that whilst appearing to be fundamentalist, it could move easily towards either irrealism proper²³, or post-secular belief. In this manner conservative dogmatism can straddle modernist truth and postmodernist truthlessness. For example, a Pentecostal doctrinal commitment to 6 day creationism can have the same doctrinal content as classically modernist fundamentalism, and can be derived from Protestant fundamentalist teaching, and yet the idea of attempting to scientifically prove that 6 day creationism is factual may not occur to a green Pentecostal youth. That is, belief in actually true myth becomes strangely possible in this sort of context.

Relational Youth Spirituality



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The qualitative researcher of contemporary Australian society Hugh MacKay has noticed that today's youth are "returning to the tribe".²⁴ Whilst this is not just a younger generational thing, as other observers of Australian culture have noticed,²⁵ the emphasis on belonging and caring, on relationships as basic to identity

and meaning in life, does represent a substantial shift from the priorities of career and acquisition in the construction of meaning more typical of the Boomer generation.²⁶

The social world that our youth inhabit is typically characterised by a peer-connectedness that is very distinctive.

Mackay describes this social world very well:

[Today's youth] are members of a generation who spend all day together at school, then get on the bus to go home and ring each other up on the mobile phone, or send a stream of text messages to each other. "Where are you now? Who are you with?" they inquire solicitously, while their parents pay the bill for this flow of continuous contact. Then, when they arrive home, they hop on the internet to link up again in a chat room, or via email ... "They are a generation that beeps and hums," one of their fathers recently remarked, and so they are. They are the generation who, having grown up in an era of unprecedentedly rapid change, have intuitively understood that they are each other's most precious resource for coping with the inherent uncertainties of life. Their desire to connect, and to stay connected, will reshape this society. They are the harbingers of a new sense of community, a new tribalism, that will change everything from our old-fashioned respect for privacy to the way we conduct our relationships and build our homes. The era of individualism is not dead yet, but the intimations of its mortality are clear.²⁷

If one combines this focus on relational connectedness with the amorphous yet pervasive cultural turn towards "spirituality", then a spirituality of relationships easily emerges. In this climate Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (God is love) strikes an immediate chord.²⁸ Love itself is now the most tangible encounter

with meaning and identity many of our young people have. The love of the new youth spirituality is quite distinct from the more egocentric eroticism and fantastic, solipsistic romanticism that the 1960s sexual revolution gave to us. It is more about friendship, and the ways in which friends now perform many of the time intensive interpersonal functions of just being together that families used to perform. Yet it is often morally relativistic as the relationship itself is central and behavioural norms are fluidly negotiated around the relationship.²⁹ Relationalism has no apparent interest in inherent or transcendently referenced concepts of morality. Absolutes of right and wrong behaviours is particularly missing in relationalism's typical construction of sexual morality. What is right and wrong sexually is simply worked out by mutual consent in the idiosyncratic process of the development of any given relationship.

The orange part of our spectrum reflects the overlay of hypermodern ease in the contemporary cultural context with a new emphasis on very connected friendship that travels with young people in as many of the varied contexts in which they fluidly move. Only the red part of our spectrum expresses discontent with the hypermodern, consumerist, free floating world – a world that savagely undermines long term relational stability.

Radical Post-Secular Youth Spirituality

Moving into the pink zone, I have found a deepening interest in a genuinely transcendent form of spirituality that can be thrown up from relationalism, tentatively seeking a way out of the messiness of relativism, and, in the final analysis, seeking something more cosmic and theologically/metaphysically referenced than simply particularist inter-human forms of relational definition. A degree of global awareness is often in this demography too, and with this comes a very troubled sense of the global injustices and exploitations that are the grounds of our fabulously materially privileged way of living in the first world. Morally motivated, globally concerned political interest – not a type of political interest our national political institutions have much interest in – is often alive in this demography. The loose demography termed “cultural creatives” often sit here; these people are aware that we have simply run out of spiritual fuel as a civilisation, and hence we have morally and politically unconscionable norms. This demography often has a genuine interest in global justice

and mystical light, though this demography typically has no connection with, or interest in, the church on both of these (or any other) fronts.³⁰

Moving out of the exploratory creativity of the pink zone and into the drivenly searching non-conformism of the white end of the spectrum, we encounter radical post-secular youth spirituality. This spirituality rejects the naïve realism of fundamentalism, rejects the consumerism and irrealism of hypermodernism, is not relativistic yet takes on the existential significance of love typical in relational spirituality. They seek a holistic integration of thought, belief and practise that is at odds with secular compartmentalism, and they seek real transcendence – not just the feeling of transcendence. They are very sensitive to alienation and exploitation, are often globally politically radicalised, and are looking for a radically different way of being in the world to our dominant contemporary norms. These are the spiritual revolutionaries of the next decades, and in general, they are as scathing of the church as of the dominant cultural norms in which our churches comfortably sit.

I am using the term “post-secular” to mean the re-discovery of broadly religious belief that is grounded neither in overconfident modernist certainty, nor abandoned to a deeply suspicious postmodern appreciation of uncertainty. In the academic world, this sort of “post-secularism” can be traced to John Milbank’s fascinating critique of secular reason.³¹

Milbank’s thesis argues that starting with the nominalists of the 14th century, the progressive secularisation and de-sacralisation of late medieval Western culture eventually gave rise to modernism with its distinctive science, politics, philosophy, theology and religion. Whilst many valuable scientific knowledge gains and technological innovations have arisen as a result of secular reason, the notion itself arises out of nominalism’s heretical theological rejection of the Augustinian spirituality of integrated participation. That is, if Acts 17:28 is taken as an important theological truth, then all aspects of reality participate in God at all times for their very being, and as all beings are unified in God, difference in creation is radically integrated into a divine harmony. Along these lines Augustine contrasts a distinctly Christian cosmology of harmony and integration with the typically pagan cosmology of egoistic competition, primal violence, and nihilistic agonism.³² Hence, Milbank

argues, it is a distinctly theological innovation (heretical, as it happens) that gives us secular reason. This secular reason promotes the functional dis-integration of the religious from other spheres of life, and forcefully regulates the morally and theologically minimalist rules of individualistic competition that govern the liberal norms of our political and economic institutions. If Saint Paul and Saint Augustine were right about reality, then a secular way of life is attempting to construct a dis-integrated agonistic unreality over the top of reality, and this will lead to serious spiritual dysfunction as we believe the unreal and invest our lives and faith in what is essentially delusional and debased. Post-secularism of Milbank's type, sees our whole post/modern Western way of life as deeply embedded in heresy, and this is what makes it so morally compromised, so spiritually vacuous, and so politically, economically, socially and psychologically degenerate and exploitative. Here is a truly radical (ie root) theological critique of our contemporary way of life.

Whilst none of the young people I sought to minister to had read Milbank, and very few had read any theology at all, even so, the sense of radical discontent with our way of being in the world, driven by an essentially theological hunger, struck me as having strong resonances with the post-secularism of John Milbank.

Overall comments on the youth spiritualities spectrum in relation to the future

Today, it is yellow that dominates the spectrum as I see it, from green to orange. Thus I have placed it at the right and centre of the spectrum, in order to indicate its conservative relationship to the dominant consumer culture of our times. An irrealist, non-metaphysical experientialism seems to be the dominant cultural outlook that backgrounds the pluralism of tacit meaning constructions typical of most contemporary Australian youth spiritualities. Forty years ago, it might have been a more positivistic secular humanism that was the dominant cultural spirituality, with the ends of the spectrum being polarised into conservative traditional Christian belief on one side and progressive atheism on the other side. But the confidence in truth itself – an essentially modernist cultural outlook – that underpinned meaning construction back then is now conspicuous by its remarkable marginality. If one is looking at our youth scene with Christian eyes formed 40 years ago, it may well seem

that the degree of spiritual openness in our youth is now remarkable. However, the range of spiritualities that are now popular may give little scope for much depth of contact with traditional Christian faith. Certainly there is now very little focused animosity towards traditional Christian belief and practise – for the link up of a positivist scientific crisis in religion per say with resentment about the regressive and hypocritical moral controls that Christian respectability then exercised in our society, are all things of the past that our contemporary youth typically have no direct knowledge of. But the dominant hypermodern spiritual sensibilities of contemporary youth are in their own way, remarkably conservative (ie supportive of the dominant consumer culture), and by their very nature, not naturally disposed towards the absolutism of truth or the total life commitment of conversion, discipleship and the prophetic Christian critique of wealth and power. The *experience* of conversion and the *experience* of corporate worship may well speak to the dominant range of youth spiritualities – but if this experience is egoistically centred in the irrealism of the cultural environment constructed by saturation in our very powerful mass media, and by the ethos of impermanence that arises out of a context of constant technological and social change, then the Church's adaptation to popular youth spiritualities may gain mass contact at a high cost in terms of long term Christian depth.

Whilst the hypermodern and consumerism in general dominates the cultural landscape of our youth at the moment, such a rapid rate of cultural change over the past 40 years makes it reasonable to assume that there is nothing fixed about the current state of play. Should external economic factors unseat consumerism as we now know it – like global recession caused by much higher oil prices – then an essentially narcotic irrealism may smack up against the very unpleasant reality of relative poverty, and be exposed as fraudulent. That is, the hypermodern bread and circus distractions from the perennial spiritual challenges of the human condition may fail. If the church is invested in narcotic experientialism itself, then what contact it has with youth spiritualities of that nature will become a liability rather than an asset. This is the cultural danger of “relevance” to the dominant youth culture of our contemporary socio-historical context. Stated more theologically, the stance of Christian spirituality that I outlined in section 2 of this paper indicates that irreal hypermodernism (and modern realism for that matter) is no friend of the gospel. Other present trends – like family and community dysfunction, and the anomie of materialistic hedonism – point

to the growing pressure for a spirituality of love, of deep even transcendently referenced love, to grow in significance. This aspect of contemporary youth spiritualities is one that the gospel does indeed have strong resonances with. But at present, whilst this is a clear possibility in our contemporary youth culture, it is not the dominant cultural force. Yet, for the church to be a community of love that can speak to the love spiritualities of our youth that are now present, much of our comfortable materialism, secularism, program fixation, driven instrumentalism, moralism, and individualism in the church will need to be sacrificed. And our theology – shaped by the equation of sin (sexual sin in particular) with moral failure, and with judgment and the fear of Hell – has very little leverage on the spiritualities of love our youth understand, and this may be because our theology is actually wrong.³³ If the Australian church is to move towards the spiritualities of love of our youth as important contact points for youth ministry, big changes are going to need to happen to our church.

Then there are the pinks and the whites, and, at the other end, the blues.

Xenophobic politicised “fundamentalism”, with a religious dimension, may indeed become a bigger force in Australian politics. This, at present, does not relate to the blue fundamentalist spirituality that operates at the peripheries of Australian Evangelical Protestantism. Yet, the uncertain conditions that foster fundamentalism proper can also foster generic “fundamentalism” of a quasi-nationalistic quasi-theological reactionary conservatism. If the politics of fear is ratcheted up to ever higher levels, right wing political conservatism, the demonization of ‘the enemy’, and xenophobic moral conservatism may hijack authoritarian religious absolutism and give the “Religious Right” an increased prominence in our society. The links between politics and individualistic, wealthy hypermodern Protestant religion already apparent in Australian politics, demonstrates how easily the right sort of religion can be politicised in Australia.³⁴ Bauman’s thesis that postmodern uncertainty produces “fundamentalist” religion may prove to be true, but this may have more to do with the ancient clandestine forces of collective moral solidarity than with religious faith as such. Yet, our experience with “One Nation” – where voters were drawn largely from nominally Christian rural conservatives – shows us that alignments between the losers in rapid social change with conservative “Christian” morality, can be readily linked in

with the reactionary racist and disenfranchised political rhetoric of deeply unsettled social discontent.³⁵ More dangerous than these regressive political fringe movements, however, is what is going on in the mainstream of Australian and American politics. The heightened competitive victor culture in spectator sport and the world of corporate success now very at home in our morally reduced hypermodern culture is easily exploited in a neo-fascist direction by careful media manipulation to link the now dominant cultural environment of our youth with a new nationalistic type of semi-religious fundamentalism.³⁶ The spectrum could swing in all sorts of dark and destructive ways.

The spectrum could swing towards radical post-secularism too. The history of the church, as G. K. Chesterton pointed out, is a history of deaths and resurrections.³⁷ In dark hours of Western culture, radical Christian reformers – such as Saint Francis and Martin Luther – have arisen. They arise out of a deep sense of discontent, and a new searching for God. People who know we are in deep trouble, and people who seek a radical moral and spiritual redemptive move of God, are people who shape the future, rather than simply being shaped by the present. But if relational spiritualities are a jolt to an essentially comfortable church snugly embedded in the dominant culture of our times, radical post-secularism will be more of a jolt.

* * * * *

Part Two: Examining Typical Evangelical Youth Ministry paradigms in the light of a Spectral View of Contemporary Australian Youth Spiritualities

The spirituality spectrum and youth ministry – an Evangelical application

In this addendum to the basic idea of a ‘theological’ and ‘religious’ youth spirituality spectrum, I would like to tentatively apply this spectral tool to the evaluation of one broad paradigm of Christian youth ministry – Australian Evangelical Protestantism. The only reason I have chosen an Evangelical youth ministry context is that I am an Evangelical myself, and have a long standing inside knowledge of this scene in 4 large Australian cities.³⁸ These comments are provisional and tentative, but should sketch out the type of concerns that specific

youth ministry cultures may need to give attention to, if the spectral model here put forward is seen to have merit.

In general, an Evangelical approach to youth ministry tends to focus its energies on the conservative to the middle range of the spectrum (blue, green, yellow), moving only slightly towards the radical end (orange). That is Evangelical youth ministry is typically “relevant” to the fundamentalist, modern/hypermodern, the hypermodern and the hypermodern/relational genres of contemporary youth spirituality. As this is where most young people sit – that is, this spectral range covers both conservative and dominant norms apparent in contemporary youth spirituality – this ministry focus reflects Evangelical Christianity’s renown marketing savvy in shaping its cultural interface to suit the comfort zones of the largest number of contemporary youth. Yet, John Drane’s fascinating thesis – via Weber and Ritzer – implies that Evangelical Christianity is actually a serious formative influence on hypermodern Western culture itself.³⁹ There may be more going on here than the Evangelical church merely contextualising its language to the idiom of contemporary culture; the Evangelical church may fit hypermodern cultural norms for inherent rather than peripheral reasons. We shall return to Drane below.

Let us now unpack the different colours of contemporary youth spirituality, and their relationship to Evangelical youth ministry, in a little more detail.

Fundamentalist Youth Spirituality and Evangelical Youth Ministry

It may seem like fundamentalist youth spirituality can be easily tapped by the Evangelical church. Yet, old style (ie 1950s – 1960s) evangelistic crusade ministries tend to hit and miss this type of spiritual sensibility, because, outside of those who grow up in fundamentalist Christianity, the concepts of guilt, divine punishment and love expressed in redemptive sacrifice that make an “appeal” psychologically powerful, are little comprehended by our contemporary unchurched youth.⁴⁰ Certainty is one thing, but the degree to which our contemporary youth culture is now post-Christian, and the degree to which more fundamentalist forms of Evangelical Christianity are now ghettoised, with their own language and concepts from another era, makes it very unlikely that American style fundamentalism will have much

lasting impact on Australian youth who are looking for simple certainty and religious authority. However, being outside the dominant stream of contemporary youth culture is, in itself, no necessary kergiamatic barrier – provided the gulf is recognised and adequately theologically understood. The beginnings of a serious Australian youth interest in Latin Mass and other forms of specifically high church worship, may powerfully theologically connect the hunger for transcendence and mystery with authority that Evangelical Protestantism – with its egoistic personal salvation focus and its modernist lack of mystery – may no longer be able to speak to.



Taken by Matt Malone, Image Source: [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Hypermodern Youth Spirituality and Evangelical Youth Ministry

Successful Evangelical youth ministry is typically seen as youth ministry that draws a big crowd, and that has an ethos of attractiveness constructed in the consumer tailored terms of the norms of the dominant peer culture of our youth. Evangelicals love to be relevant, have no time for mere tradition, and are typically thoroughly at home in the contemporary cultural context anyway. This makes it no conceptual difficulty to construct what we assume to be a user friendly interface between youth culture and the gospel. So well resourced Evangelical youth scenes are typically as hypermodern friendly as the organisers of an event or program know how to make it.

More profoundly, however, Evangelical Christianity can be seen as the natural religion of hypermodern Western culture. This may explain the apparent mystery as to why the USA is both such a culturally and economically “progressive” place, with little interest in the preservation of tradition and a deep commitment to the separation of religious institutions from politics and the market, and also such a Evangelically religious place.

John Drane applies George Ritzer’s “McDonaldization thesis” to the church and notes that Protestant Reformed Christianity can be seen as pioneering in the rationalisation and comodification of spirituality in Western culture. This is most evident in the Enlightenment formed, free market friendly, politically separatist, modernist, technologically minded form of the Reformed Protestant tradition: Evangelical Christianity.

Ritzer understands “McDonaldization” as the contemporary expression of what Weber described as the cultural dominance of formal rationality in the efficient pursuit of any given aim.⁴¹ This outlook is characterised by its normative pursuit of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control. Ritzer situates this outlook within the cultural paradigm shift from modernity to postmodernity – the hypermodern. Here, our view of reality is fragmented as holistic meaning is lost, and the sacred, mystery, intrinsic value and continuity with the past are squeezed out of our culture. Procedural uniformity, regulated bureaucratic control and a pragmatic task achievement orientation overtakes more of our cultural life form as McDonaldization progresses. Religion that is at home in this outlook (and that may well have actually contributed to the cultural viability of this outlook) is likely to do well in a hypermodern context. And yet, Drane notes, this type of religion is only attracting conservative elements of hypermodernism, not reactionary elements.⁴² Evangelical Christianity’s typical social conservatism and typical ease with the blend of subjective experience and task orientated rationalisation, often finds its own brand of hypermodernism as its natural cultural milieu.

Relational Youth Spirituality and Evangelical Youth Ministry

Typical models of Evangelical youth ministry do not seem to have much of an impact in this area. The emphasis on programs and entertainment events, the tacit individualism, and the emphasis on doctrinal answers to meaning and identity concerns more typical of the “happening” youth scene in our bigger churches, skirts around this immediate spiritual interest in the lived reality of love. Further, whilst in practise many Evangelicals are just as morally compromised and relativistic as the dominant norms of our society, in theory, the notion of salvation that falls out of the classical Evangelical framing of the doctrine of penal substitution, is morally absolutist.⁴³ Further, the time management norms of our Evangelical church culture tend to be too pressurised and too neatly subdivided by what Mackay describes as our “old-fashioned respect for privacy” to connect with the relationalism of our youth. The idea that the church could deeply embody love, sustain real bonds of deeply connected interpersonal caring, is fine in theory, but in practise it would mess with “the real world” time pressures imposed on us by our career, (private) family and interest priorities. Church is far more of a distinctly religious place – a place we go to for teaching and worship – for us than it is a bonded community reality that expresses the love of God through those bonds, and then extends, in love, outwards.

Radical Post-Secular Youth Spirituality and Evangelical Youth Ministry

Over the time I was a Chaplain, I observed a number of radically post-secular young people from unchurched backgrounds convert to faith in Christ. When these kids converted, they invariably went for highly demanding, visibly different church communities – like the Orthodox and the Salvos.⁴⁴ They did not want a Christianity that just fitted in with cultural normality. In fact, they were attracted to Christ and His church *because* He (and the church) offered a different way of being in the world to the atomised, consumerist, irrealist, entertainment focused, goal driven, egocentric, materialist banality they wished to leave behind.

In terms of emotion and experience, Evangelical culture is often of one piece with the cultural norms of self focused ‘feel good’ marketing; and in terms of instrumental logic and work ethics, Evangelical culture is often of one piece with the cultural norms of our hard nosed, goal driven (and endlessly driving) business world. In short, a stereotypical Evangelical view of the Christian walk easily offends the hunger for

spiritual depth, mystical encounter, intrinsic relational richness, communal meaning and the holistic integration of the personal and the public that are the deepest grounds of attraction to Christ to radically post-secular young people.

For these youth who react *against* the norms of our dominant consumer/management culture and *towards* relational and spiritual truth, the “relevance” of Evangelical Christianity to our contemporary consumer/managerial culture is a serious obstacle. These cultural non-conformists tend to find the Evangelical church too embedded in the norms of our dominant consumer culture to readily minister to their desire for a radically different quality of life.

Spiritual targeting in Evangelical youth ministry

An evangelistic concern does not simply look for its own ‘niche market’ when faced with the range of spiritualities contemporary young people demonstrate. Evangelical Christians want to proclaim and live the gospel in a way that will be understandable to every single one of the young people they seek to minister to. This aspiration for universal reach is premised on the theology of their being a distinctive intrinsic human nature, made in the image of God, that all people have, that can be appealed to in all cultural contexts. However, in contemporary Western Evangelical practise, the desire for maximum reach is easily appropriated by the logic of mass marketing, which does not in fact seek universal reach, but targets the majority and seeks to commercially disappear non-conforming minorities so that they will be forced to join the majority. So a tacit targeting does typically go on in Evangelical youth ministry, and as the effectiveness of youth ministry is often measured in terms of numbers of young people involved, this re-enforces the desire to appeal to the dominant cultural trends of our times.

In my observations, it is the conservative to middle ground – numerically heavy, though skewed to the right – of the youth spiritualities distribution curve that Evangelical youth ministry typically targets. Two things are going on here. Firstly, there is a large youth ‘market’ to appeal to in these spiritualities. Secondly, these spiritualities are ones that fit dominant Evangelical cultural norms. But is this target going to be effective in the long term? In the parable of the sower, our Lord explains

that the seed of the Word sown in spiritually shallow soil, or in soil where worldly fixations are already deeply entrenched, is not going to produce a harvest to eternal life. In effect, if we aim at quality rather than quantity, the fruit of genuine spiritual life is going to have a far more powerful evangelistic reach than a numbers based attractiveness can generate via the methods of mass appeal. In this context, intensely targeting the spiritually hungry margins – as Jesus did – who are open to radical transformation, is more likely to realize a culturally revolutionary impact than going for mass effectiveness.

But here is the rub. What if the Western Evangelical Church in general is spiritually shallow and infested by the thorns of worldly concerns? If this is the case, then the Evangelical church does not have the spiritual resources to effectively target the spiritually promising margins of contemporary youth spirituality.⁴⁵

I believe the Western Evangelical church, in general, is seriously spiritually compromised by its ease of associating with the dominant cultural norms of our times. There is a credible body of Evangelical literature that gives considered weight to this conviction.⁴⁶ If this is indeed the case, then the Evangelical church is being called to repentance by the searching cries of the radical elements of our contemporary youth spirituality – but are we listening?

Until the Evangelical church becomes conscious of how embedded it is in the irrealist, materialistic egoism of late modern Western culture, the very need for repentance will not be apparent. In seeking to minister to radically post-secular young people I was deeply challenged regarding my own spiritual shallowness, my entanglement in the “cares of this world”, my lack of lived relational spirituality, the rather academic nature of my experience of mystical union with Christ and his body, and the degree to which I was very comfortable with the artificial segregations of a secularised world view. More troubling than that though was my sense the Evangelical church supported all my inadequacies and discouraged my desire to grow spiritually. We are not much of a non-conformist church now.

Conclusion

If our dominant youth spirituality is hypermodern, then the apparent pluralism of this outlook hides the underlying irrealism that is the ‘theology’ of this spirituality, and the underlying egocentric experientialism that guides the ‘religious’ practices of this spirituality. Whether this irrealist theology and egocentric religion is a medium that can faithfully transmit the truth of the gospel is a question that should be seriously examined by Christian youth ministries seeking to tap into the “spirituality” of our youth. Yet, the interest in love and the possibility of a radical questioning of the very logic and practice of secularity itself does seem to provide a natural cross-over point from contemporary youth “spirituality” to Christian life. However, if such a crossover is to occur, this will have a profoundly de-stabilizing impact on our typically secularistic, individualistic, consumeristic and conservative church cultures. Typically, the institutional gate keepers of our Australian Evangelical churches – whilst full of the re-structuring organisational “innovations” that are part and parcel of our hypermodern managerial mindset – resist radical paradigm change very effectively. Thus, the forces of change – the red, pink and white spiritualities – could plunge Australian Evangelical churches into a very turbulent near future, unless the forces of status quo preservation – the blue, green, yellow and orange spiritualities – manage to hold the ship of the church in its current, deeply theologically and religiously questionable trajectory. Whatever happens, the youth are our future, and they will have the final say – even if that means they abandon our churches entirely and God moves amongst them in new forms of church, or radical old forms of church, that contemporary Australian Evangelical Christianity cannot yet imagine. So an understanding of what the specific theological and religious inclinations are of our young people – both within and outside of our church – is, I think, of critical importance not just to youth ministers, but to the future of the church as a whole.

End Notes

¹ Broadly defined, positivism is the conviction that only what can be scientifically demonstrated is real.

² In the parlance of the social sciences, quantitative social research deals in the statistical analysis of “hard” data – such as age, gender, income distribution etc – whilst qualitative social research deals in the statistical analysis of “soft” data – what people say they believe, what values people espouse etc.

³ On this body of new spirituality literature, see for example, Rolheiser, R., *Seeking Spirituality*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1998; O’Murchu, D., *Religion in Exile*, Gateway, Dublin, 2000; Tacey, D., *Re-Enchantment*, HarperCollins, Sydney, 2000; Tacey, D., *The Spiritual Revolution*, HarperCollins, Sydney, 2003; Frost, M., & Hirsch, A., *The Shaping of Things to Come*, Hendrickson, USA, 2003; McQuillan, P., “Youth Spirituality – a Reality in Search of Expression.”, *The Journal of Youth and Theology*, November 2004. On the cultural and intellectual fading of confident positivistic atheism, see Alister McGrath’s *The Twilight of Atheism*, Rider, London, 2004.

⁴ Protestant Evangelical fundamentalism is historically deeply embedded in Enlightenment framed modern and secular Western culture, and is typically supportive of the liberal and secular political and economic freedoms that have developed in Western culture since the 18th century. See Rawlyk, G.A., & Noll, M.A., *Amazing Grace: Evangelicalism in Australia, Britain, Canada, and the United States*, Baker Books, USA, 1993.

⁵ The Non-Conformist Protestant heritage has strong historical associations with the separation of the religious from the political, commonly known as secular governance. North American democratic secular governance is premised on the civil and liberal interface of the two spheres of private belief conviction and public political order, via freedom of expression and persuasive rational argument. See Hunter, J.D., & Guinness, O., (eds.) *Articles of Faith, Articles of Peace*, The Brookings Institute, USA, 1990. Hence Non-Conformist Protestantism can be described as secular in two ways. Firstly, supposedly discrete “spheres” of human life – such as politics and religion – are dis-integrated, in a nominalist manner, and this dis-integration creates “the secular” as discrete from the sacred. Thus, “the secular sphere” itself is deeply embedded in the theo-political assumptions of this type of religion. Secondly, the notion that reason itself is neutral regarding the different claims of politics and religion, for example, pre-supposes that reason is both not theological nor political. That is, this type of religion constructs “reason” as discrete from theology. However, the degree to which such reason can be understood as anything other than secular – if it is definitionally not theological – becomes hard to grasp. In short, the very logic of the contemporary descendents of Non-Conformist Protestantism is still typically premised on an essentially 18th century Enlightenment view of Reason, and as this view developed into 19th century atheistic positivism outside of Evangelical Protestantism, it seems that non-theological Reason, as a supposedly neutral secular playing field, is in fact very far from theologically neutral. But contemporary Evangelical Protestantism, being still content with 18th century Enlightenment epistemology, has not seemed to notice how ‘secular reason’ has bitten the theological hand that fed it. Today’s Western Evangelical Christianity can hence typically be described as a secular form of religion because it assumes that some neutral “secular reason” is still viable for the pursuit of its apologetic and political agendas, and the logic of this appeal is deeply grounded in its own nominalist theological assumptions.

⁶ Tacey, D., *Re-Enchantment*, Harper Collins, Sydney, 2000, 7.

⁷ Bauman, Z., “Postmodern Religion?” in Heelas, P., (ed) *Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1998, 55 – 78.

⁸ See Professor Philip Almond’s lecture, “Fundamentalism, Christianity and Religion”, delivered on air by the ABC Radio National’s “Encounter” program, 7/04/2002. For the transcript see www.abc.net.au/rn/relig/enc/stories/s520400.htm

⁹ Of course, whilst fundamentalists are Evangelical Protestants, Evangelicalism itself does not equate with fundamentalist. Whilst Evangelical Protestantism is almost universally theologically conservative (ie for Evangelicals belief in the traditional creeds of the church is still just as strong now as it was prior to the theological and philosophical developments of European high culture in the 19th and 20th centuries) it is not at all necessarily politically conservative (see Wallis, J., *God’s Politics*, Lion, Oxford, 2005) or doctrinally and intellectually fundamentalist (see Noll, M.A., *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, IVP, UK, 1994).

¹⁰ Noll, M.A., *American Evangelical Christianity*, Blackwell, UK, 2001, see Part 1, “Who are Evangelicals?” particularly Chapter One, “Historical Overview”, 9-29.

¹¹ The irony of the strongly fundamentalist influenced Religious Right in America decrying Islamic militant extremism as “fundamentalist Islam”, when the USA is by far the most militant nation on earth, and the only true home of religious fundamentalism, is bazaar.

¹² Though even in the USA Evangelicals like Jim Wallis question how typical the more fundamentalist “Religious Right” are of American Evangelical Christianity. See Wallis, J., *God’s Politics*, Lion, UK, 2005.

¹³ Maddox, M., *God Under Howard*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2005.

¹⁴ Faith is not, necessarily, only compatible with “pre-modern” belief – though the “pre-modern” may be far more interesting than our progressive prejudices have led us to assume. Indeed, exploring pre-modern Western belief, in the light of post-modern critiques of modernism, in order to construct new approaches to true belief now, is the very interesting theological project of the UK based theological movement known as “Radical Orthodoxy”.

¹⁵ I draw the term “hypermodern” from Middleton, J.R., & Walsh, B.J., *Truth is stranger than it used to be*, IVP, USA, 1995, p54. Yet whilst Middleton and Walsh point to a continuity between modernity and postmodernism in the context of their use of the term “hypermodernity” in Evangelical literature, Os Guinness more clearly points out the neat fit between a modern way of living and a postmodern set of beliefs. See Webb, K & Webb, H., “Calling, Postmodernism, and Chastened Liberals: A Conversation with Os Guinness”, *Mars Hill Review* 8 (Summer 1997): 69-87; www.leaderu.com/marshall/mhr08/os1.html

¹⁶ See Lyotard, J-F., *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*, Manchester University Press, 1984.

¹⁷ Realism believes that the truth about reality is humanly knowable. Anti-realism does not believe that the truth about reality is humanly knowable, but does believe that we can know truths about our perceptions of reality, and we can know truths of logic concerning the structure of our consciousness. Irrealism simply doesn’t care about whether one makes any hard distinctions between reality and illusion, or truth and fiction, or not. See McCormick, P.J., (ed) *Starmaking: Realism, Anti-Realism and Irrealism*, MIT Press, 1996.

¹⁸ See Frankfurt, H.G., *On Bullshit*, Princeton University Press, 2005. Professor Frankfurt links a pervasive cultural disinterest with truth to the intensive advertising presence

contemporary Western people live with, in an interview that can be found on www.pupress.princeton.edu/video/frankfurt/

¹⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, University of Michigan Press, 1995; Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Verso, New York, 2002.

²⁰ I have included Pentecostal within Evangelical here, although the reverse might be more accurate. Since the 1980s “charismatic renewal movement” in the Australian Evangelical scene, it has been increasingly difficult to distinguish Evangelicals from Pentecostals. I appreciate that it is possible to think of Evangelicals and Pentecostals as being significantly different types of ecclesial traditions, but for the purposes of this paper, the differences are now negligible.

²¹ Web site: www2.hillsong.com/default.asp

²² Because there is a God, and because He always speaks to us in the context of culture, it must be recognised that God is able to redemptively speak to people from where-ever they culturally are.

²³ The way in which films often seem to have significant belief implications for those at home in hypermodernity – films like the “Passion of Christ” and “The Davinci Code” – reflects the tacit conviction that carefully crafted moving images and spectator experience, for all effective purposes, actually *are* reality.

²⁴ Mackay, H., “One for all and all or one: it’s a tribe thing.” *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 13, 2002: www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/07/12/1026185109842.html

²⁵ Hamilton, C., *Growth Fetish*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2003; Eckersley, R., *Well and Good*, Text, Melbourne, 2004.

²⁶ See Mackay, H., *Generations*, Macmillan, Sydney, 1997, Part Three.

²⁷ Mackay, H., “One for all and all or one: it’s a tribe thing.” *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 13, 2002 pp1-2 of www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/07/12/1026185109842.html

²⁸ See: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html

²⁹ Mark C Taylor points out the relationship between relationalism and moral relativism on ABC Radio National, “Encounter”, 12 March 2006, www.abc.net.au/rn/relig/enc/stories/s1584917.htm

³⁰ See Paul H Ray and Sherry R Anderson, *The Cultural Creatives*, Three Rivers Press, USA, 2001. This demography is, in the terms defined by Ray and Anderson, typically older than our youth demography – but it is a demography that sits well within David Tacey’s characterisation of the non-churched spiritual quests of many Australian young people.

³¹ See Milbank, J., *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1990. See also Blond, P., (ed) *Post-Secular Philosophy*, Routledge, London, 1998.

³² Augustine, *City of God*, Penguin Classics, UK, 1986.

³³ See 9.3 and 9.1 below, including footnotes.

³⁴ Maddox, M., *God Under Howard*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2005.

³⁵ Kingston, M., *Off the Rails: The Pauline Hanson Trip*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1999. Whilst Kingston's fascinating account of 30 days in the 1998 federal electoral struggle of One Nation gives no specific attention to religion, the obvious support Ms Hanson was able to attract from Queenslanders from outside of Brisbane is well documented by Kingston. That demography is typically politically and morally conservative in comparison to the rest of the country, and this conservatism still has strong ties to the sort of nominally Christian belief more mainstream in Australian life 50 years ago.

³⁶ See ABC Radio National's Background Briefing, 19 March 2006, titled "Postmodern Politics" which looks at Mark Danner's observations about the absence of interest in truth in the game of high power political spin. www.abc.net.au/rn/backgroundbriefing/stories/2006/1593326.htm

³⁷ See Chesterton, G.K., *The Everlasting Man*, Ignatius Press, USA, 1993.

³⁸ I have been involved in Evangelical youth ministry in Melbourne, Adelaide, Cairns and Brisbane over the past 25 years.

³⁹ Drane, J., *The McDonaldization of the Church*, Dartman, Longman & Todd, London, 2000, pp 50-52.

⁴⁰ It is interesting to note that in Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* (Penguin Books, London, 2004, chapter 7) he discusses whether parental influence in the child in the development of conscience is affected by stern or indulgent parenting. He thinks that guilt – a sure sign of the presence of the super-ego – is likely to develop with or without stern parenting, but when Freud was writing, the cultural power of stern conformist morality as the context in which most German families themselves sat, was very strong. When, as in our context in Australia, clear cultural concepts of morality are increasingly being replaced by collective hedonistic pragmatism and subjective emotivism, the pervasive underlying psychological presence of guilt consciousness seems to drop off sharply. This tends to make traditional Evangelical appeals to conversion – as essentially a mechanism of cleansing from guilt consciousness – more or less incomprehensible to our youth. If Evangelical Christianity must approach sin as a moral issue, and if it seeks the psychological leverage of moral guilt consciousness as its primary means of proselytising, then, in this context, it becomes increasingly ineffective in its proclamation of the gospel. Further, if the Orthodox theologian Christos Yannaras is right (*The Freedom of Morality*, SVS Press, USA, 1984), sin is not, theologically, essentially a moral issue, but is an ontological issue, and the psychological appeal to guilt appeasement is both heretical and manipulative. Yannaras' case is powerfully theologically argued and offers, in my opinion, the opportunity for us Evangelicals to re-think what sin and salvation is all about in a manner that could be both theologically liberating and proselytically far better suited to our times (as the truth always is).

⁴¹ Ritzer, G., *The McDonaldization Thesis*, Sage, USA, 1998.

⁴² Drane, J., *The McDonaldization of the Church*, Dartman, Longman & Todd, London, 2000, 80-81.

⁴³ For a classical Evangelical framing of penal substitution see Packer, J.I., "What did the cross achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution." (Tyndale Biblical Theology Lecture, Cambridge, 1973), http://www.the-highway.com/cross_Packer.html . "Cheap grace" – see Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship*, Macmillan, NY, 1963 – means that we can live like everyone around us and still consider ourselves to be both saved and forgiven. That is we can be as morally compromised and relativistic as everyone else, but still have our own

sense of superiority to the world, and consider ourselves as being committed to a moral absolutism (that we never live) because we are saved and forgiven. And we first world Evangelical Christians are, in general, as deeply situated within the profound immoralities of our time as most first world Western people in general are. On the idolatry and exploitation of our consumer way of living, we are no different to “the world”. See, for example: Jacques Ellul, *Money and Power*, Marshall Pickering, UK, 1986; Susan George, *A Fate Worse than Debt*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1994; Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and its Discontents*, Allen Lane, UK, 2002; Radio National documentary Background Briefing (26 Feb 2006) “Selling China: The Wal-Mart Effect” www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/bbing/stories/s1576650.htm. When it comes to the “religious right” in Australian politics, Evangelical/Pentecostal Christianity is typically deeply aligned with Conservative politics, politics that has systematically distorted truth in the public arena, and that has harnessed fear and self interest in its quest for electoral dominance (not that “Radical” politics is, on this front, any different). See for example: Andrew Wilke, *Axis of Deceit*, Black Inc, Melbourne, 2004; Marion Maddox, *God Under Howard*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2005; Tony Kevin, *A Certain Maritime Incident*, Scribe, Melbourne, 2004. Then, when it comes to the dominant social, sexual, familial, and professional norms of our times – and these are generally relativistic, hedonistic, escapist and ego-centric – the typical range of life difficulties people grapple with in my Evangelical church leads me to conclude that there is little appreciable demographic difference between Evangelical Christians and main stream Australia; divorce, managerial power politics, workaholism, sexual promiscuity, drug use and escapist entertainment seem just as typical amongst Evangelical as their non-Evangelical counterparts of similar demographics. So whilst we claim moral absolutism, and this jars doctrinally with the comfortable moral relativism of contemporary relationalism, in practise we typically are socially morally relativistic and also deeply morally compromised in the very fabric of the norms of our way of life.

⁴⁴ Of course, the Salvation Army is an Evangelical denomination. Yet, they are atypical of Evangelical denominations in that they are visibly not integrated into ‘civilian’ cultural normality, as evidenced by their uniforms, their abstinence from alcohol, and the degree to which local parish life is actively compassionately engaged with the poor and the outcast – ie the marginal – is typically much higher than for other Evangelical denominations.

⁴⁵ Of course, the power that Saint Paul talks about as evidence of the authenticity of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 2:5, is the Holy Spirit. The work of the church can only ever be adequately done by the Holy Spirit as the dynamo for the church. To critique the church as a weak and sinful human institution is nothing that should surprise anyone, but to rely on anything other than the Holy Spirit for the church to be what it actually is – the body of Christ in the world today – is to respond to the truth of our weakness without faith.

⁴⁶ See, for example: Scott Stephens, “You Cannot serve God and Mammon” (2005) “The Church in Ruins” (2004), audio CDs of lectures given at the Centre for Theology and Politics, www.theologyandpolitics.com ; Barker, A., & Hayes, J., *Sub-Merge: Living Deep in a Shallow World*, UNOH, Melbourne, 2002; Drane, J., *The McDonaldization of the Church*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 2000; Dave Andrews, *Christi-Anarchy*, Lion, UK, 1999; Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, W Publishing, USA, 1997; David F Wells, *God in the Wasteland*, IVP, UK, 1994; Mark A Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, IVP, UK, 1994; Os Guinness, *Fit Bodies and Fat Minds*, Baker Books, USA, 1994; Os Guinness & John Seel (ed), *No God but God*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1992; Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, Eerdmans, USA, 1986.

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