

# Theology and Needs

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Evidence abounds of the continuing disenchantment of very many young people with institutional Christianity, while they retain an interest in religion and spirituality. Beyond the Vatican's Secretariat for non-believers recently announced study, there is little evidence of the Church grasping this fact and examining it in any depth.

Two events in the space of one week recently caused me to dig out of my files material that I prepared some time ago on the religious psychology of mid and late adolescence. The first was a visit to a christian contemplative community, only loosely connected to an established religious Order, in Sussex. There is nothing fixed or final about the numbers residing there, as they are free to come or go at will, but there are generally between nine and twelve in community. On the day of my visit and participation in their life together, there were ten young men in residence, all between 19 and 30 years of age. This community is under the direction of and revolves around the elderly Anglican priest who set it up some years ago.

The community atmosphere, very noticeable to a visitor, was impressive and seemed to be an 'overflow' from the morning and evening hour of movement and meditation together. Later conversation revealed that the majority of these young men, caught up in this contemplative way of life, had no interest in institutional Christianity and no desire to take part in a normal church service.

Two or three days later, as a stimulus for class-room discussion, I conducted a simple survey among the forty-nine fifth formers of the very ordinary County Secondary School in which I teach. The questionnaire, filled in seriously and anonymously by the boys and girls, revealed nothing spectacular, but it was yet another reminder of the gulf between young people's spiritual needs and institutional Christianity. For example, to the question, 'when did you last go to a Church service?' Out of forty-nine replies, two replied: 'within the past week'; ten replied: 'within the past six months' (this included Christmas); seven replied: 'never'; the remainder replied with answers like: 'I can't remember', 'I think I was christened', 'when me gran died', etc.

I was a little surprised to find, in view of the expected reply to the above question, that, to the question 'do you pray', there were twenty-nine who replied 'yes', of whom eight prayed 'regularly'. My little classroom survey and visit to the contemplative community in themselves prove nothing, but they are two of the many pointers to the gulf which exists between young people's spiritual needs and what the Church provides for them, in the way of theological presentation,

challenging service and supportive direction. I would submit that this is because too few of those who have oversight and authority over matters affecting young people 'know' them, and no theology for young people has been worked through which keeps in view their own particular religious psychology and spiritual needs.

The religious psychology of young people should not be considered in isolation, but the restricting confines of an article make it impossible to do otherwise. However, the second part of the article, presenting a theology for young people, does try to respect also the sociological and linguistic backgrounds.

The study of the moral development of children and young people became academically respectable with the pioneer work of Jean Piaget in the early 1930s. As distinct from moral development, but of course very closely related to it, the study of religious development became respectable in the 1950s, based mainly upon the work of Allport, Harms and Argyle. Most of this rather recent research concentrated upon childhood and early adolescence; Piaget's work, for example, did not go beyond the age of twelve. The amount of research which covers the period which interests us (the age of lapsation), which is the period of mid and late adolescence (15-25) is extremely limited.

The society in which we live provides, even precipitates, the experiences essential to our personal and corporate growth to maturity. Crises come and go, and are necessary experiences for a person's development to mature adulthood. Adolescents are particularly susceptible to conflicts and emotional disturbances. These are not so much inherent in adolescence, as determined by the nature and demands of our society. This is particularly true as the period of adolescence has become longer. Puberty tends to occur earlier as time passes, and adolescents' independence is deferred longer, by the extension of secondary education and constant encouragement to enter tertiary education.

It is a well-established principle of psychology that each individual has his own rate and quality of growth. Researchers have likewise shown that all must pass through the same stages of growth and in the same order. However, not necessarily at the same time. This holds true not only for the cognitive and affective domains, but also for the religious development of the individual.

Most recent studies are directly or indirectly influenced by J. Piaget's famous book *The Moral Judgement of the Child*, published in 1932. According to Piaget, development takes place through a number of stages, from the ego-centric to a co-operative orientation, from an acceptance of adult constraint to a more or less autonomous 'rational' morality. The idea of more or less 'natural stages' of development, through which children and young people pass on the way to maturity, is central to Piaget's thought. So is his insistence on the impact and importance of the peer group on adequate development.

Since this work of Piaget's was first published, a large number of researchers have grappled with the ideas he propounded, or sought to supply what was lacking, for Piaget totally neglected the emotional development of the child.

Piaget's work was also rather limited in scope and presents no statistical evidence. Lawrence Kohlberg, working in the United States, remedies both of these deficiencies in his research. Piaget's conclusions are, however, supported completely by Kohlberg's findings.

In Britain, in the 1960s, Bray and Edwards worked extensively on the theories of Piaget and came up with support for all his research, especially the importance of the peer-group as an important sphere of influence.

Most psychologists, working in the sphere of moral and religious development, have concentrated, like Piaget, upon boys. Only relatively recently, with the work of Norman Bull and Maureen Lee, has research included girls. It appears, from their detailed work, that girls develop morally and religiously earlier than boys. They are more likely to reach a stage of personal autonomy and certainly internalise standards more progressively as they get older. Barbara Reid, in 1966, comparing Protestant and Catholic young peoples' moral values, found that for both groups 'honesty' was the quality most highly valued.

Ronald Goldman is the most well-known of recent researchers. His work has provided general support for Piaget, although the age boundaries of each researcher were not quite the same. Goldman's findings indicated that development in religious thinking was slower than in general thinking. 'What is disturbing', he said, 'is that the childish immaturities continue so long into adolescence'. (*Religious Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence*, London, 1964.)

While the work briefly outlined above was going on in the U.S.A. and Great Britain, in France Pierre Babin was conducting extensive research among students. In *Faith and the Adolescent* he concentrates his attention upon 'the sense of God' among adolescents. By 'sense of God' he means the relationship of the whole person—affectivity, intellect and will—to God. He found three important processes which he called 'Nuration,' 'Ego-morphism' and the 'Ethical sense'.

By 'Nuration' Babin means a mentality and expression in which God seems to be the term of man's efforts. It seems to be a realisation of God, through whatever means—reason, education or natural needs—which is apart from the revelation of God given in Jesus Christ. So the adolescent gives the impression that his sense of God is closer to natural religion than to historically revealed religion. This 'nuration' is good, Babin maintains, because the break in the form of religion occasioned by the violent eruption of instinctive forces 'allows the young person to re-think religious truth and perhaps thus enter into a more personal faith'. (*Faith and the Adolescent*, London, 1964).

Babin describes 'ego-morphism' as a mentality and form of expression in which one's concept of God or relationship with God seems profoundly determined by the psychological conditions of the subject's personality. Babin distinguishes two prominent forms of adolescent ego-morphism: (i) pseudo-panteism and (ii) idealisation. The first is not so much panteism, as an immanentism of God, caused by an accentuated symbolic sense. A sensitivity of God's relationship with the World, which does not consider His transcendence. 'The adolescent is

conscious in a confused sort of way that things participate in each other through a kind of consubstantiality'. This does not mean to say that the young person does not experience the strong pull towards spiritual entities; the attractions of both the material and the spiritual are strong.

Idealisation is another form of adolescent ego-morphism. The young person interprets the absolute by the terms of his own ego and thus subconsciously modifies the Divinity. Babin maintains that ego-morphism has value and significance because it 'calls the young person to interiorise, personally to assume the objective notion of God conveyed to him during his childhood', God, therefore, ceases to be a potentate or an indifferent far-away Being. He becomes a living person who speaks to me now and invites me to fulfil my desire to live in a divine way, in Jesus Christ.

*The Ethical Sense* is Babin's equivalent to Piaget's 'autonomous rational morality'. However, Babin considers that this 'ethical sense' arises from 'the repercussions of moral behaviour on the sense of God'. This occurs, he says, in two ways: (i) the relationship with God is profoundly influenced by the subjective needs of the adolescent for moral excellence, (ii) 'the moral impulse is principally controlled by the order of God the Creator, rather than by the personal call of Jesus Christ'.

Babin's indepth study, which we have had to present in truncated and, as a result, almost indigestible form, is of great value and complements the work of earlier researchers. More recently, in this Country, Dorothy Berridge, 1969, has added her research to that we have already mentioned. In *Growing to Maturity* she points out that the mid-adolescent period (15-18) is a highly idealistic, if often unrealistic period. There is about this stage what she calls a certain 'pseudo-intellectualism' and 'pseudo-emotionalism'. These are developed, she says, as part of the defensive role in the peculiar psychology of this age group.

Dorothy Berridge calls the mid-adolescent period the age of commitment. It is characterised by a greater sensitivity and insight into the feelings of others and a certain degree of tolerance, lacking before in the emotional upheavals of the earlier period. However, this commitment of which Dorothy Berridge speaks, while it is a real and sincere desire to give of oneself to a person or a cause is often of a temporary nature. It must not be confused with the total and unrestricted act of commitment which is possibly by a mature adult. Yet it remains true that 'they are looking for a good cause to serve, an ideal to commit themselves to. They need real problems to cope with and real people to meet with who are already involved in facing them—the tragedy is that they rarely seem to find either'. (*Growing to Maturity*, London, 1969.)

Let us now draw together the salient points from the research available, points which will be very much in mind as we develop a theology suitable for this period of mid and late adolescence.

- (a) Development in religious psychology takes place through a series of stages, all of which have to be passed through.
- (b) The peer group is an important sphere of influence.
- (c) Girls develop morally and religiously earlier than boys.
- (d) 'Honesty' is the virtue most admired.

- (e) Development in religious thinking is slower than in general thinking.
- (f) Young people value their World and come to God through it.
- (g) God is formed, for the young person, in the image of his perfected/idealised self.
- (h) The relationship of the young person with God is profoundly influenced by the subjective needs of the adolescent for moral excellence.
- (i) There is about this stage of development a certain pseudo-intellectualism and pseudo-emotionalism projected by the young people.
- (j) It can, with reservation, be called 'the age of commitment', sincere but often temporary in nature.
- (k) The young people in this stage (mid and late adolescence) need the challenge of real problems to cope with, and the example of real people who are themselves coping with these problems.

Before proceeding to the central purpose of this article, namely a theology for young people built upon their psychological needs, I would like us, for a moment, to consider 'language'.

Basil Bernstein, among others, has done a great deal of research upon language and social class. Educationalists have not been slow to apply what he has to say of the 'elaborated code' of speech of the middle class, and the 'restricted code' of speech of the working class, to the communication problems of the classroom. Prior to Bernstein's research, George Orwell, in the appendix to his novel, *1984* (published 1949) explaining 'Newspeak', the language of Oceania, speaks of three different types of vocabulary. Vocabulary 'A' consists of words for everyday life, vocabulary 'B' is made up of a type of political elaborated code, and 'C' is a vocabulary entirely composed of technical terms..

If the Vatican's Secretariat for Non-Believers is sincere about its study of the lack of faith among young people today and their rejection of Christianity, then the Secretariat would do well to look very closely at the use of language by the Church and in the Church. If there are real problems of communication between the tertiary educated middle class teacher and his Secondary Modern/Comprehensive adolescent pupils, then there must be just as real a communication problem between the middle class priest, preacher or educator and adolescent christians.

If we are to produce a theology which 'speaks' to the needs of young people it must be in a language they will understand. We must, therefore, not only start where young people are psychologically and socially, but we must also avoid special 'religious' language.

We have seen that adolescents are the sensitive barometers of an anxious and insecure world. However, while they are insecure, they are nonetheless a realistic generation that wants facts, events. Respecting our starting point—young people as we find them—and resolving to use an untechnical language, we need a theological starting-point, which is as concrete a fact as we can find. An event which will present, at the same time, a challenge to adolescents. Everything points to 'that

absolute, visible certain fact and event—Jesus Christ alive today'. (Babin, *op. cit.*)

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ not only presents a certain fact and event, it also presents a very realistic challenge. A challenge which finally, after all the historical details have been examined, can only be met by an act of faith. It is a challenge that offers no third way—either one accepts the Resurrection and, as we shall see, all else follows, or one rejects the event and cannot then claim Christian allegiance.

Acceptance of the resurrection event both provides us with, and springs from, a living faith in a living Jesus. Let us pause and think about the act of faith. Faith is not just a grace bestowed, nor is it an irrational act, with no other norms than man's moods or subjective religious experiences. It is an act which requires certain objective elements. First of all, a person must reveal himself to me through signs, acts, etc. Secondly, I must be well disposed or 'open' to him. Grace works on two levels—from without and from within. There is the presentation of the signs of faith, and also the indispensable openness. As a person's life progresses, and he matures psychologically, so the act of faith will be adapted to take the form and dimensions which correspond to the stage of life of a person's psychological development.

The signs necessary to stimulate the adolescent's faith are available, if presented correctly. The signs are not just the recorded and witnessed events—the Christian Church exists, clearly traceable to that early community that witnessed to the Resurrection event.

The Christian Church not only exists, but speaks for and as the sign of Christ. When Jesus said: 'I will be with you always' he was not just making some kind-hearted promise, he is speaking his resurrection. It is the dynamism of the risen Jesus which sustains and illumines the Church, the sign of Christ.

Once accepted, the resurrection event points chronologically two ways—forwards and backwards. Forwards to the gift of the Spirit, back to the life and death of Jesus. Let us first look back.

The statement—there could be no resurrection if there had not first been a death—seems obvious and unnecessary. However, for young people, the implications are strikingly important. It has two important consequences. First, the death of Jesus puts the final seal upon how truly human the historical Jesus was. In their longing to be understood, young people feel the need for very 'human', sympathetic, warm people to lead them. Observation confirms that the most successful teachers, youth leaders and priests with young people, are those that the adjective 'human' is commonly attached to. It is useless educators merely telling young people that Jesus was human, somehow adolescents have to come to a realisation of the truth of this. They have to realise both, that Jesus Christ was not the Son of God pretending to be a man, and he was not one of the 'inhuman' adults that they sometimes meet with. He was truly human.

The scene of Christ's agony in the garden of olives is one which appeals to them. Here is an experience they can understand and identify with. Not only his sufferings, his struggle of will, but also Christ's

apparent human doubts, overcome by his complete trust in his Father, all this shows how truly human, and appealingly real, Jesus is. This genuineness of Christ's final human hours gives real confidence to young people, who have so often been educated in such a way that the Passion of Christ is seen as yet another episode played out by the all-knowing, everything-is-possible Son of God.

An adolescent's peer group is very important to him, and when he hears how Christ's friends deserted him in his hour of need, his identification with Christ deepens. Later, when the Risen Jesus behaves with his friends as though nothing had happened, this once again reassures the young person, that if and when he betrays Christ, the way back will not be so difficult.

The second important consequence of the statement—there could be no Resurrection if there had not first been a death—is that when the adolescent accepts the resurrection, he accepts that death is not final. This is very often the time in a young person's life when a grandparent (or sometimes perhaps a parent) dies. It is unusual for a person to move from childhood to adulthood without at least one death in the family. Very many young people have close love-ties with at least one of their grandparents, and this is often the first time death touches them with its sharpness and pain of loss. In a society which will not speak of death, and treats it as the absolute end, the adolescent faces the realistic problem of deciding for himself whether belief in life after death is real or imaginary. A resurrection-based approach to life reassures and confirms their own faith and trust in the loving providence of He who raised Jesus to life.

Another statement can be made, from which two more important consequences for young people can be drawn. There would have been no resurrection if there had been no Incarnation. The resurrection is a consequence of the Incarnation.

The first point is that we are speaking 'about Jesus Christ Our Lord, who, in the order of the Spirit, was proclaimed Son of God in all his power through his resurrection from the dead'. Romans 1:4. This means that a direct result of the resurrection is knowledge of the Incarnation. The fact of the Incarnation was proclaimed to the world through the rising of Jesus. This would mean that before the resurrection, the disciples did not know Jesus was *the* Son of God. This does not conflict with Simon Peter's profession of faith in Jesus as the Christ, for the Messiah, from a traditional Jewish viewpoint, need not have been any more than a great prophet and teacher.

It follows that things were not at all easy for the first disciples of Christ. As already mentioned, the play-acting atmosphere of much religious education has succeeded in giving the impression to young people that everything for Jesus and His disciples went according to the script, rather than according to the Scriptures. Adolescents can more easily identify with failed-friends who make good, than with actors. (May we call to mind that 'honesty' was discovered to be the most admired and looked for virtue in adults.) This approach to the Incarna-

tion, through the resurrection, assures the adolescent that he cannot be expected to know it all at once, any more than the Apostles did.

The second point, flowing from a consideration of the Incarnation, involves the young person and his world—an immediate, present world of pop music, dress, hair fashions, etc. We have seen how the adolescent values his world and the world at large and can no more run from it and hate it—as most young people believe Christianity would have them—than he can hate himself and his interests. Few young people have been led to understand that a proper understanding of the Incarnation of the Cosmic Christ gives a complete blessing to their world, and everything in it, which is not sin. 'He is the image of the unseen God and the first born of all creation, for in Him were created all things in heaven and on earth, everything visible and everything invisible . . . all things were created through Him and for Him'. Col. 1:15-16. Therefore, the world is not divided neatly into sacred and secular, holy and profane. Nothing which has been touched by God can be profane. Instinctively, young people know this to be true. It is fascinating to notice how young people have instinctively and independently arrived at the same conclusions—albeit, usually understood and expressed in a non-verbal manner—as Teilhard de Chardin and modern theologians. The 'ego-morphism' we discovered as part of the adolescents psychological make-up, seems to be perfectly in line with Paul's Romans 8:18-25. However, this 'ego-morphism' does not close the young person's eyes to the lack of equality, justice and love in the wider world. The *Letter to the People of God*, issued by the Council of Youth at Taizé Summer 1974, representing the 40,000 young people who attended, opens with these words:

'We have been born into a world which for most people is not a place to live in. A large part of mankind is exploited by a minority enjoying intolerable privileges. Many police states exist to protect the powerful. Multinational companies impose their own laws. Profit and money rule. Those in power almost never pay attention to those who are voiceless'.

Young people are well aware that the Church too has become tainted by the world and its trappings. Later in the letter they continue:

'Church what do you say of your future?

Are you going to give up the means of power, the compromises with political and financial power?

Are you going to surrender your privileges, stop capitalising?'

Their concern is a loving one, for in the concluding paragraphs they commit themselves, with the People of God, to dying with Christ and rising up to become the People of the Beatitudes.

The formal doctrine of Original Sin never enters their lives, yet at the same time their lives are ruled by what the formal doctrine stands for. The social ills of society hang heavy upon many young people, and all would acknowledge the existence of large quantities of greed, pride and selfishness in the world. Into this world we are all born. Arising from his individual beginnings—his instinct for self-preservation and early ego-centricity—man is naturally inclined to selfishness. The totally

selfish man would be very maladjusted, because he would be incapable of inter-personal relationships. The perfectly mature man is he who is completely unselfish. The totally unselfish man would inevitably draw down upon himself—as Jesus did—the uncomprehending insecurity and anger of the World. ('If the World hates you remember that it hated me before you. . . . If they persecuted me they will persecute you too. Jn. 15 : 18 and 20.) The completely unselfish and perfectly mature man would be incapable of sin, as indeed Jesus was. Union with God grows to the degree to which we die to our selfishness, and find our security in God.

To speak to young people of 'dying with Christ' is not at first understandable. Nor, in fact, do they really comprehend what is meant by the words 'redemption' or 'justification'. They have, of course, heard from infancy that 'Jesus died to save us' but left unasked and unanswered are the questions, 'from what?', 'how does it work?', 'why was it necessary?'. Many young people know the technical words used, and can fit them into intelligible sentences, but so few—as to be almost none—comprehend sufficiently to be able to express in their own language what they mean. If adolescents ask these questions of educators, they either reply: 'It's a mystery', or give a reply in sacred elaborated code, only understood by adults trained in that code.

This idea is expressed in the New Testament in terms of 'the Kingdom of God'. The Kingdom will come, or is in fact within us, to the degree to which we do the Father's will. 'Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done'. Jesus was the man in whom the Kingdom had perfectly come, for He did His Father's will perfectly. To do God's will is to surrender our own, this is a 'death' which hopes for a resurrection. The act of faith is the beginning of the journey for it implies an act of confidence as much as an act of belief.

Jesus proclaimed this gospel constantly. 'Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven, he is my brother, and sister and mother'. Mt. 12 : 50. 'Anyone who loses his life will find it'. Mt. 11 : 5. So it is that the whole of the Good News of Jesus is summed up in His commandment: 'Love one another as I have loved you'. John 15 : 12. A selfish man is not capable of this love, for to love is to make a gift of oneself. All of this is understandable to young people, as they struggle with their own selfishness and their emergent ability to love.

Paul sought to explain Christ's saving death in the metaphors of 'redemption' and 'justification'. Young people struggling with their own selfishness can understand that he who was unselfishness personified gave—after a struggle—that obedience to God which no other man was capable of, 'even to the death of the cross'. Christ's obedience won the spirit of life for Himself, and the Spirit of life and love for his brothers.

One of the biggest problems that young people experience, from a Christian point of view, and one of the most important realisations for their proper development, is their own unique value and dignity as individuals. They have been told repeatedly that they are the children of God by baptism, yet realisation of this dignity rarely dawns. The coming of the Spirit of Jesus, and its indwelling within each christian,

not only assures us of our dignity, it also sites God's presence, not far away in the skies, but within each believer.

While in the process of self-seeking young people often like solitude, however, loneliness is a heavy cross thrust upon many of them. There is present within them a longing for someone very close who would fully understand them, without even the need for words. Their longing, and need for independence, usually makes the parent-child relationship a difficult one, and the problem is often added to in an intimate boy-girl relationship. The Risen Jesus can supply that basic human longing, so accentuated in adolescence. He is enabled to do this by his resurrection, which releases Him from time and place commitments and makes Him really present to the Christian, wherever that person might be.

The Counsellor's approach, both in line with all we have said above, and completely logical to the young person, is that we can only grow in unselfishness and maturity if we are prepared to try and do as Christ did. Possessing the Spirit—growing in the consciousness that 'I live now not I, Christ lives within me'. Gal. 2.20—we must be constantly trying to put others first, others within whom Christ also dwells. This positive effort to understand that as Christ dwells within me, so does he dwell within others—where he must be loved and served—brings a new freedom and joy.

These theological thoughts, based upon the limited but exact psychological research available, are merely intended as 'pointers' to the need for the serious and extensive development of a theology for young people. If the Vatican's Secretariat for Non-Believers is serious in its study of the lack of faith among young people today, it must be prepared to encourage and finance research into the religious psychology of mid and late adolescence and likewise encourage theologians who know and understand young people to use this research.

If this were to happen the whole People of God would have to be prepared for an upheaval. Witness to this is the challenge thrown at the People of God by the 40,000 young people who gathered last year at Taizé for their first Council of Youth ('the centre of which', they declared, 'is the risen Christ, whom we celebrate, present in the eucharist, alive in the Church, hidden in man our brother').

'Church, what do you say of your future?

Are you going to become the 'people of the beatitudes', having no security other than Christ, a people poor, contemplative, creating peace, bearing joy and a liberating festival for mankind, ready even to be persecuted for justice?' (*Letter to the People of God*)