

Generation Y's Feeble Faith

Australian Study Shows Lower Interest in Religion

By Father John Flynn

MELBOURNE, Australia, OCT. 15, 2006 (Zenit.org).- A study of the younger generation's spirituality in Australia revealed fairly low levels of religiosity and practice. "The Spirit of Generation Y: Young People, Spirituality and Society" was recently released under the authorship of a team of researchers, led by Redemptorist Father Michael Mason, of the Australian Catholic University.

From 2003 till early 2006 the researchers studied a national sample of young people in their teens and 20s. The methodology relied on surveys and face-to-face interviews.

Researchers found that 48% of Generation Y believe in a God, 20% do not, and 32% are unsure. Two-thirds of those who do not believe in God, or are uncertain, do believe in a "higher being or life-force."

Generation Y refers to the cohort born between 1976 and 1990. They followed Generation X (1961-1975) and the baby boomers (1946-1960). The youngest members of Generation Y were aged 13 when interviews began in 2003, and the oldest were aged 29 at the end of 2005.

"It is likely that this cohort is the first in the last 100 years in which the majority have no memory of frequent church attendance," commented the ample summary of the report. The full report will be published in book form next year.

In general the study found that the social forces influencing contemporary religion and spirituality -- secularization, the relativism of postmodernity, consumer capitalism, individualism -- have a greater impact on younger people.

The researchers concluded that members of Generation Y have taken strongly to two modern principles. They are: that an individual's views and preferences, provided they harm no one else, should not be questioned or constrained; and that spiritual or religious beliefs and practices are purely personal lifestyle choices -- in no way necessary.

In spite of moving away in large numbers from traditional religion they seem to have a strong sense of purpose in their lives, according to the study. There is no evidence of a widespread plague of meaninglessness or social alienation among Generation Y.

This positive finding is in spite of declining support from churches and the local community. As these factors have weakened, younger people have compensated by turning to family and friends.

A private affair

The study identified three main strands in the spirituality of Generation Y.

-- Christian, 44%. Overall, only 19% of Generation Y are actively involved in a church to the extent of attending religious services once a month or more. Conservative Protestant denominations -- 16% of Gen Y -- have by far the highest rates of attendance. Nevertheless, many more believe in God and Jesus, and pray regularly. In general, religion is seen as a private matter. And there is a strong tide of movement among Generation Y Christians away from involvement or identification with a church, and even from religious belief.

-- Eclectic, 17%. This consists in believing in two or more New Age, esoteric or Eastern

beliefs (reincarnation, psychics and fortunetellers, ghosts, astrology, etc.) and perhaps engaging in one or more alternative spiritual practices (yoga, Tarot, tai chi). Some of these people attend religious services but most do not. Such beliefs and practices are more common among young women than among young men.

-- Humanist, 31%. This group rejects the idea of God, although a few believe in a "higher being." Almost half believe that there is very little truth in religion, and fewer than a quarter believe in life after death. They also largely reject alternative spiritualities.

The study also revealed that the level of social concern among Generation Y is not high. They tend to be more self-centered and lacking in altruism than older generations. This could be linked to the lower levels of religiosity. In fact, those who are actively involved in service to the community and have positive civic values are far more likely to come from the ranks of those who have spiritual and religious beliefs and actively practice them.

The Catholic Church provided the largest single group among the young people studied. Among them 18% identified themselves as Catholic. Another 8% declared themselves Anglicans, and 16% declared themselves as belonging to one of a variety of other Christian churches. Added up, plus some other minor groups, this gave a total of 48% declaring a religious identification, against 52% lacking any such identification.

The researchers were struck by the numbers without a formal religious identification; it was 17% to 18% higher than the level found in previous Australian census data. The latest national census was carried out in 2001.

Another notable finding was that there is no significant difference in the scores of Generation Y males and females. This confirms other recent research in Australia that young women are overall no more religious than young men. Given that mothers are known to have great influence in the religious socialization of children, "it is hard to overestimate the importance of this finding and its likely consequences," commented the report.

Catholic commitment

On nearly all measures of belief and practice Catholic members of Generation Y are positioned between the Anglican and the Other Christian groups. The scale runs from those least likely to affirm religious beliefs (Anglicans) to the group most likely to do so (Other Christians).

Only on belief in life after death did the proportion of Catholics accepting the doctrine approach that of Other Christians. On the belief and practice scales, Catholics scored significantly lower than Other Christians.

Compared with their parents' generation -- those aged 45-59 -- Generation Y Catholics were very similar on most items of belief and practice, with two exceptions:

-- They are more likely to affirm that God relates to us as a person.

-- They are less likely to find it OK "to pick and choose one's beliefs."

The researchers highlighted these differences as being "striking," because they show the younger generation as more, instead of less, orthodox than their parents' generation. On both points the differences were statistically significant.

Not all was positive, however. Two other differences, described as being less strong and characterized as "trends," were that the Generation Y members are more likely to agree

that "morals are relative," and less likely to claim that faith was important or very important in shaping their lives.

The researchers divided the Christians according to levels of involvement with their faith. Among Catholics 29% fell into the committed or active categories, compared with 15% for Anglicans and 53% for the Other Christians. As for the rest of the Catholics, a full 53% were described as marginal or nominal, and another 17% as eclectic.

Sydney's Catholic archbishop commented on the study's findings in a Sept. 28 speech to an education conference. Noting that a relatively high percentage of young Catholics believe it is "OK to pick and choose beliefs," Cardinal George Pell declared he was worried about the current situation.

He observed that these, and other data, indicate "a malaise and confusion in the general approach to life rather than a few isolated points of heresy or unbelief."

The cardinal also noted that the Generation Y survey was not able to detect any religious effect of attendance at Church schools, even though a majority of those who believe in God and attend Church schools say the religious education is helpful.

Benedict XVI recently touched on the Australian situation, in a May 18 speech when he welcomed the country's new ambassador, Anne Maree Plunkett, to the Holy See. Describing the situation of Australia as one where "the disquieting process of secularization is much advanced," the Pope augured that World Youth Day 2008 in Sydney will be "a time of deep ecclesial renewal, especially among the young." A sentiment no doubt shared by many.

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