
The Youth of Today

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We live in an evolving dynamic world that is conditioned by a form of society which emphasizes what are called secular values. The distinction between sacred and secular, so precious to past moralists, has become blurred. The barrier behind which Christians often sheltered, classifying themselves as spiritual and not carnal, is growing thinner. The present era may be labelled a scientific technological one which facilitates the generating of a certain dualism between the demands of the gospel and the need for self-fulfilment in creative activity. For the first time in salvation history young people are privileged to find themselves honoured with a major role and responsibility in the shaping of their destiny while realizing that they have been endowed with rights and means by God to accomplish their challenging task. Humanity is evolving into an ever-growing reality which is not predictable from previous situations. We are developing by plunging into the unknown.

Now while it is obvious that we exist in a changing world, we may not be so conscious of the accompanying fact that our own self-image is altering. We outline five chief traits of modern youth's self-understanding: an appreciation of oneself as a being journeying on the way, a changing being; a more pronounced conviction of oneself as embodied, a person in the world; a fresh appreciation of oneself as a member of society, a sharer with others; a person as a doer, not just a thinker; and a responsible free creative being.¹ There is general agreement that the spiritual and technological energies that have resulted from advances in

1. I. MACQUARRIE, *Three Issues in Ethics* (SCM Press).

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science and technology have considerably influenced both culture and society. A fruitful channelling and synthesizing of these energies is of vital importance. People are becoming ever more conscious of their human dignity and resent past shacklings of society; they are demanding total development. The exploration of the world of the oppressed that has come about from a fresh scientific consciousness has given rise to a critical questioning of our previous living and understanding of the gospel. The gap between religion and life must be filled in; people are clamouring for a religion that works. Herbert Marcuse in his book *One Dimensional Man* maintains that in modern technological society so-called free institutions and democratic liberties are manipulated to restrict freedom, coerce individuality, confuse exploitation, and narrow the field of human experience. While we may differ in our views in regard to the effects that technology and scientific discoveries will have on the progress of human development we must give a realistic acceptance to the fact that we are living in a changing world which influences our beliefs and the way we express them in words.

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church is essential reading for anybody interested in modern culture and its effects on society, especially numbers 53-62 of the document. No. 53 tells us that the word culture in its general sense 'indicates all these factors by which man refines and unfolds his manifold spiritual and bodily qualities'. Now the presence of the mass media has helped to bring about a general cultural unification in today's society, this, of course, helping to bring about a better realization that the Church is the sacrament and the sign of unity for the human race. The press, the telephone, tape recordings, frequent postal communications, films, etc., all condition human thinking and resulting attitudes. Marshall McLuhan tells us that a medium is any extension of man, such as a book, clothes, etc. He proposes the theory that the media a person uses to extend the senses and the faculties will determine what the person is rather than the other way around; any medium will tend to amputate the function which it extends. Any new medium constitutes a new environment which controls what people who live with it do. He sees the present generation as eye-oriented in contrast to the previous ear-oriented one. McLuhan thinks that we have a new kind of breed among us - the first generation of the electronic age. They are conditioned by the fact that the medium controlling their environment is not print but television - which is everything happening at once

whereas print was one thing at a time, one thing after another. The electronic media are seen as forcing people into a tribal unity. Current teaching methods when used with the new television-tribal man will result in large numbers of psychic drop-outs from these aural-oriented people. It is outside our scope to discuss at length McLuhan's theory and his probings. He is content to investigate and make sounding probes; he holds that the medium is the message.²

Our present-day pluralistic society is open and mobile and so very quickly influenced by the mass media. Nowadays the radio and the television expand and even supercede the press in offering their services of information, education and entertainment; they have progressively developed into vital media of popular education and literature and even culture. People are becoming ever more conscious that they themselves are the authors and artisans of the culture of their environment. An increasing sense of autonomy and personal responsibility are emerging side by side; a fresh invigorating form of humanism that emphasizes the dignity and responsibility of the human person is developing. Man develops with the passage of time and so has a historical and social aspect; it is dynamic in the people who create it and are created by it. Pope Paul has pointed out that 'a true Christian does not know immobilism'. Dr Frankl as a logotherapist sees in responsibility the very essence of human existence. We must also remember that the work and writings of Teilhard de Chardin have added a momentous impetus to Darwin's concept of evolution; the latter's view of a dynamic reality has been evolved by de Chardin who has found many admirers. Contemporary philosophies have indicated how much the human person needs communication and dialogue so as to fully mature and develop. They have also made us aware of the value and need of free decision-making so that people will grow into responsible, trustworthy individuals.

The principles of pluralism and subsidiarity must be reckoned with in the structuring of today's society. Young people tend to unite and indulge in a certain 'togetherness' while respecting individual differences and a personal uniqueness. Present-day cultures are not necessarily divisive but often are rather unifying

2. McLuhan, *Hot and Cold*. Edited by G. E. Stearn (Penguin, 1972). JONATHAN MILLER, *McLuhan's Main Ideas* (Fontana Collins).

towards a common type of culture. We can pinpoint some characteristics of contemporary evolving culture which appear among educated races: the sciences develop an apt critical sense; psychological studies evaluate human activity at a greater depth; historical research leads to things being examined in the light of change and evolution. Increased leisure, urbanization, increasing communication between people and countries in varying spheres of activities are all affecting modern youth. The Church accepts the fact of plurality of cultures but recognizes a common universal culture as a further development of them. She is willing to learn from and to utilize the values of modern culture while willing to offer her own contribution. There is no conflict between faith and reason. A legitimate autonomy of culture and the sciences can co-exist so that the sciences will have freedom to develop in accord with their own scientific principles.

Dr Ainslie Meares, an Australian psychiatrist of world fame, interviewed a considerable number of young people in a relaxed manner, and then published his findings in a book titled *Dialogue with Youth*. I summarize his conclusions under the following headings: 1, Youth is a new phenomenon. 2, Youth is extremely idealistic. 3, Youth has a biological need to freedom from parents. 4, Youth is a period of competitive study. 5, Youth has an urge to rebel against present structures in society. 6, Youth has a deep need of comradeship with companions (desire to be good 'mixers'). 7, Youth has a tendency towards unisex. 8, Youth inclines to drugs. 10, Youth is in search of identity. Numbers 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8 and 10 were accepted as being fundamentally correct by young people whom I checked against here in the North of Ireland. Numbers 1, 7 and 9 were not fully accepted as being correct though most thought that they were partially true. The above findings are valuable as contemporary psychologists maintain that a person's self-image determines one's conduct. Self-understanding and self-acceptance are basic for authentic human living. We cannot accept and understand ourselves as we are until others first understand and accept us for what we are.

While omitting any detailed treatment of the modern phenomena such as the hippies, Jesus groups, encounter groups, varying types of drugs and their patrons, pentecostal groups, small prayer groups, women's liberation movement, vandalism, violent resistant groups, etc., we must face the unpleasant fact that they have come into existence and are to some extent the product of our changing society. Likewise in regard to what we term our permis-

sive society. Now there are forms of rebelliousness that are positively productive. The useful positive ones should be distinguished from the negative expressions of protest against society, such as wearing dirty clothes, leading unhealthy lives, indulging in free love, etc. The basic problem for young people is often the problem of identity crisis – though not appreciated by them as such. The modern young person wants to acquire a sense of independence with a definite goal in mind, wanting to know one's future and finalized personality. This involves a severing of previous dependence on parents and resulting tensions are inevitable. The nature and needs of the times beget different qualities in varying historical periods. It has been said that Martin Luther would have remained an obscure cleric only for the particular state of the Church in his time. Many of the advances in civilization such as scientific discoveries, fresh forms of art, and revitalizing spiritual directions, have been brought about by young adolescents. Becoming impatient with existing structures and their environment, they tried to envision and accelerate the future. They became actively concerned about the world and its needs.

The danger of atomic energy, nuclear weapons, the practical existence of the third world, the scandal of institutional violence, and the closed static juridical framework that dominated the structures of society, made many of our present generation both thoughtful and constructive. A more open dynamic form of society that put the emphasis on personal responsibility appealed. People felt that as well as acquiring a sense of what they were and what they wanted to be, there was also the need to become involved in working for a better world. Nowadays we talk about 'global construction' (world development), about promoting the welfare of mankind, and about improving world conditions. Tradition no longer dominates as we set our sights on a dynamic oriented future. See the desired image of the Church; she is no longer a triumphant Church that stresses her isolation from the world. Openness is a required quality with modern youth; people desire to develop and mature, and so they multiply contacts and experiences. Creative freedom and personal responsibility attract. Authenticity and integrity of person are highly esteemed. The obligation-oriented type of ethical code that flowed from Kant's philosophy has faded before the impetus of a modern personalism. A morality of the minimum which was based on strict conformity to laws and regulations makes little appeal. We want to be citizens rather than mere subjects. The basic motivating forces in human

life consist in change, movement, concern, sharing, personal decision-making, in the varying situations of daily living. Christian moralists are facing up to the fact that the person who is making a decision is no longer relying on a mere rule book but on Christ who is the law for Christians. Present day moral attitudes take an increasing account of results and to a limited extent of motives rather than of mere rules. The sociological structure of society is no longer governed by a concept of 'blind obedience'. In the political field democracy is gaining popularity; the patriarchal form of society has waned. It is true that youth sometimes feels incapable of adequately responding to the demands and the signs of the times due to a lack of proper Christian education about social responsibility. One of society's main functions is the utilizing of its potentialities for the proper education of children. There is much room for improvement in this matter.

Today's society is ever more appreciating the fact that external laws are secondary and limited in the great purpose of life – growth in love of God and one another. Christianity is being understood as a religion of love and freedom of the children of God. Morality must embrace the whole range of human living. The past impersonal character of civilization repels. Father B. Häring thinks that it is sinful to submit to only external laws instead of regulating one's life in view of friendship with God and of the law of grace, in an attitude of gratitude and responsibility for the common welfare.³ Real human living calls for communication, dialogue, mutual confidences and trust, and genuine Christian love. Theologians speak of a theology of freedom and liberation in docility to the Holy Spirit and in a concerned service to the community, even taking account of particular charisms. Pope Paul recently pointed out that Christian liberation has a regenerating capacity that enables us to be good, optimistic, agile and intelligent in acting beyond personal interests.⁴ The basic Thomist insight that man is an image of God in so far as he freely orientates his activity is finding increased acceptance today. The over-developed type of spirituality known as the *fuga mundi* type is becoming unpopular. The world as God's creation is being seen as good in itself; it is no longer regarded with suspicion as if it were intrinsically connected with evil. We must be on our guard

3. HÄRING, *Sin in the Secular Age* (St Paul Publications, April 1974).

4. *L'Osservatore Romano* (English edition) 8 August 1974.

against all the valueless forms of life that opportunists will try and sell through the mass media, and against the dangers of highly romanticized images of pop stars and drop outs that are portrayed for our consumption.

Today's youth are very conscious of the fact that external authorities can never take the place of the personal conscience. We fulfil ourselves by being faithful to the voice of conscience. Each one has an obligation to ensure that the conscience is correctly formed. Vatican II affirmed that children and young people have the basic right to be encouraged in the evaluating of moral values with an upright conscience, and to endorse them by personal choice, and so to know and love more fully their creator. At times people will abuse their liberty, but the abuse does not take away the use; otherwise people would be deprived of their ability to make personal the meaning of life – something which must not be allowed to happen. People want to come into contact with a personal God, a being who will influence their daily living, one who loves them and whom they can love in return. To show care and concern for the neighbour appeals to them as the practical way to explicate their love for God. They desire to feel and express their love in personal relationships, to encounter God and relate to him in the secular relationships of everyday life. Sin is seen as a failure to love, a denigration of one's own moral autonomy rather than a violation of obedience.

It appears that many young people today have a certain mistrust of authority and a disdain for the legal facet of obedience. To offset this problem authority must be communicative, listening and educational, ready to become the servant of the community. We all have a mutual need of each other so that we may grow and expand in love of our creator and one another. We must endeavour to unite service and loving concern so that we will co-operate together for our own fulfilment and at the same time safeguard the good of the community. Once we are accepted just as we are and loved for what we are many problems and tensions will vanish from our lives. The co-operation of youth is essential to accomplish this task. Experience inclines me to think that in most cases it will not be wanting.