



# Contemporary Australian Youth Spiritualities and Evangelical Youth Ministry

by

**Paul Tyson**

*Paul Tyson was formerly a secondary school teacher and chaplain and is now a doctoral candidate at the Queensland University of Technology, where he also lectures in the sociology of religion. His thesis explores post-secular possibilities for truth and meaning in contemporary Western culture and society. He can be contacted at p.tyson@qut.edu.au. There is a summary of the article immediately below and the full text starting on page 4.*

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## Summary

(1,250 words)

Much of the new literature on spirituality takes as given the notion that everyone has spirituality. 'Spirituality' is seen as something all people have in common, sometimes with different generations having their own distinct 'spirituality'. This paper finds a universal notion of spirituality too vague, and generational notions of spirituality too indiscriminating. It attempts to clarify useful distinctions of spiritualities when spirituality is defined as a function of a person's basic belief assumptions and their actual practices. Using this approach the paper seeks to map the range of youth spiritualities typically found in one large Australian secondary school.

The model used to describe the way different types of belief and practice interact and differentiate in a spectral model.

At the conservative right end of the spectrum is the blue colour of **modern fundamentalist** spirituality. This spirituality seeks certainty, authoritative meaning and a clear moral framework. Next is a green colour which is the blending of blue fundamentalism with yellow **hypermodernism**. This blend is often seen where American fundamentalism combines with contemporary consumer culture. The yellow of hypermodernism has a spirituality of experience, choice and self actualisation. After yellow comes orange, the overlap of yellow and red. The red is **relationalism** which, to varying degrees, expresses discontent with the atomisation, fragmentation and superficiality of consumer culture, and places high value on meaning derived from relationships. With red, we are now past the half way point in the spectral sweep from conservative to radical. After red comes pink, the overlap of red and white. At the far end of the spirituality spectrum comes the white of **radical post-secularism**. These young people have no interest in modern certainty or postmodern irrealism, reject hypermodern consumerism and 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'.

Of these spirituality types, only modernist fundamentalism is '**secular**' in the sense that its belief world assumes 'conservative' religious Biblical supernaturalism is in conflict with 'progressive' atheistic scientific naturalism. All other spiritualities are in some manner **post-secular** and this has revolutionary implications.

### ***Evangelical Youth Ministry to those with a fundamentalist spirituality***

Protestant fundamentalism is a modernist island of certainty in a sea of postmodern uncertainty, at war with atheistic science and worldly hedonism. Fundamentalist Protestant churches are, as embattled ghettos, often very close knit and this communal bondedness has a strong appeal to outsiders. But fundamentalist spirituality is not mainstream in Australian religion.

It may seem like fundamentalist youth spirituality can be easily tapped by the Evangelical church. Yet, old style evangelistic crusade ministries only hits those who grew up in fundamentalist Christianity, because 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.

### ***Evangelical Youth Ministry to those with a hypermodernist spirituality***

'Hypermodern' describes the marriage of *postmodern* beliefs (the abandonment of the need for coherent truth and universal meaning) with very *modern* practices of life (consumerism, technology, mass media, mobility etc). It is typically pragmatic and materialistic, and has strong lines of separation between the inner personal world of beliefs and values, and the outer public world of actions and legality. Unlike modernist fundamentalism, hypermodernism is irrealist – it simply doesn't care about whether one makes any hard distinctions between reality and illusion, or truth and fiction. It is only whether something gratifies one's desires that is important.

Successful Evangelical youth ministry is typically seen as big, attractive, relevant and as hypermodern-friendly as possible. Evangelical Christianity can be seen as the natural religion of hypermodern Western culture as Enlightenment influences have helped it adapt best to free market friendly, politically separatist, modernist, technologically minded and commodified forms of spirituality. However, since hypermodernist consumerism is the status quo, being hypermodern friendly attracts only conservative youth and often repels spiritual reactionaries.

### ***Evangelical Youth Ministry to those with a relational spirituality***

Today's youth are typically characterised by a high level of *peer-connectedness*. 'Love' itself is now the most tangible encounter with meaning and identity many of our young people have, but it is quite distinct from the egocentric eroticism of the 1960s sexual revolution. It is more about friendship, though it is typically morally relativistic. Absolutes of right and wrong are missing, what is right and wrong is simply worked out by mutual consent.

The emphasis on programs and entertainment, the individualism, and the doctrinal approach to meaning and identity in typical Evangelical youth ministry means that there is little for those interested in a relational spirituality. The idea that the church could deeply embody love and sustain real bonds of deeply connected interpersonal caring is fine in theory, but in practice the relationalism of our youth easily conflicts with 'the real world' time pressures of our church people, embedded as we are in our busy career, family and personal interest priorities. Church is far more of a distinctly religious place – a place for teaching and worship – than a bonded community that expresses the love of God.

### ***Evangelical Youth Ministry to those with a radical post-secular spirituality***

There is a deepening interest in another form of spirituality, seeking a way out of the messiness of relativism, wanting more than relationalism, and searching for something transcendent. Radical post-secularists often have a very troubled sense of the global injustices that are the ground of our privileged way of life in the first world. These young people have a genuine interest in global justice *and* mystical light, but typically have no connection with the church on either of these. 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.

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

The dominant hypermodern spirituality is remarkably conservative (ie supportive of the dominant consumer culture), and 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 corporate worship may speak to many but if this experience is centred in egoism, irrationalism and impermanence, then mass contact may be gained at a high cost in terms of long term Christian depth. Hypermodernism is no friend of the gospel.

There is growing pressure for a spirituality of transcendentally referenced love, but for the church to be a community of love that can speak to this means that much of our comfortable materialism, secularism, program fixation and individualism will need to be sacrificed. If the church is to move towards the spirituality of love, big changes will be needed. Further, if relational spirituality is a jolt to an essentially comfortable Evangelical church, radical post-secularism will be more so.

### **Conclusion**

The apparent pluralism of youth spirituality today hides the dominant underlying irrationalism of our youth's beliefs, and the egocentric experientialism common to much of their practice of life. Yet the interest in love and the possibility of a radical questioning of the very logic and practise of secularity itself does seem to provide a natural cross-over point from contemporary youth 'spirituality' to Christian life. But such a crossover will have a profoundly de-stabilizing impact on our typically secularistic, individualistic, consumeristic and conservative church cultures.

# Contemporary Australian Youth Spiritualities, and Evangelical Youth Ministry

Paul Tyson

(Full text)

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A Christian understanding of the nature of reality finds ‘the spiritual’ in the divine Person of Christ as the transcendent ground of personhood and meaning. Saint Paul is very clear about this in Colossians 1:15-20 and elsewhere. I take a Christian understanding of ‘the spiritual’ 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. Contemporary scholarship, however, does not embed the notion of ‘spirituality’ within a specific theological framework such as this. The term is typically used to cover any experience or belief that is not reductively materialistic. Yet such a concept is so broad and loose that it only tells us that scientific atheism is now out of fashion.

To find out anything more useful about one needs to identify the underlying beliefs and practises of young people that now actually flourish. So, to draw up a spectrum of different spiritualities detectable in contemporary Australian youth culture, it is necessary to describe the underlying ‘theologies’ and ‘religious practises’ that separate one colour in the spectrum from another.

In order to make some tentative observations along these lines, this paper abandons the a-theological and a-religious concept of ‘spirituality’ in favour of my own Johannine commitment to a Christian understanding of spirituality (see John 1:1-18). This will provide theological and religious landmarks with which to compare and contrast the tacit theologies and religious practises I seek to uncover.

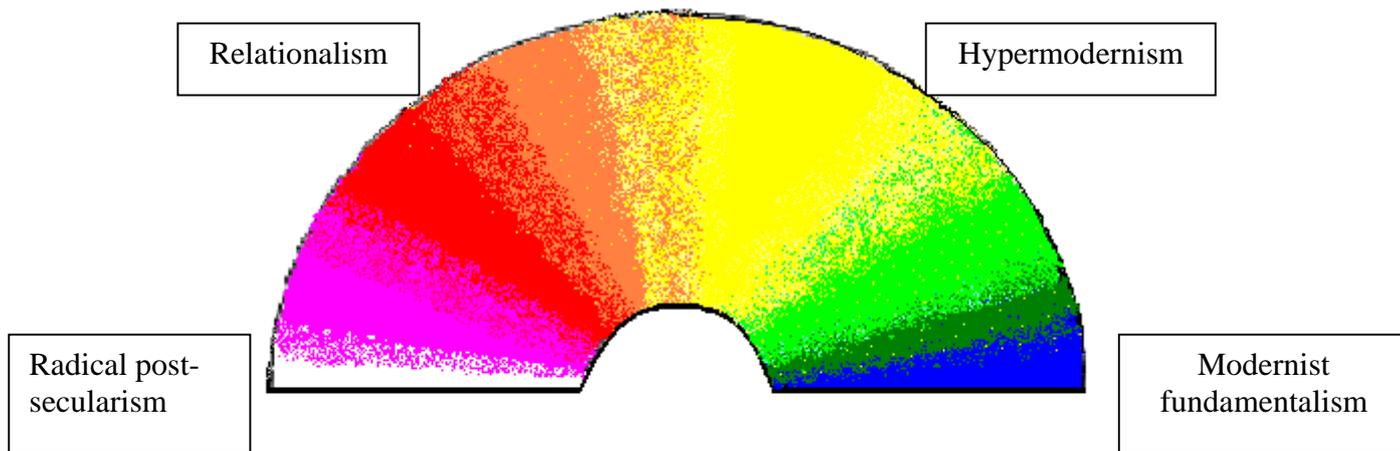
## Distinguishing colours in the spectrum of contemporary youth spiritualities

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’.



Only the blue part of the spectrum is modern and ‘secular’ in orientation. That is, modernist fundamentalism still operates on the model of ‘conservative’ religious Biblical supernaturalism in conflict with ‘progressive’ atheistic scientific naturalism in a battle played out according to the rules of some neutral, secular reason. Australian fundamentalist youth spirituality is strongly shaped by American cultural and religious influences in this regard. Yet, whilst it is probably now growing in Australia, it remains, from my observations, a relatively minor component on the spectrum of contemporary youth spiritualities.

Everything that is not dark blue is post-secular. A generalised and significant shift away from the modernist and secular frame of belief has commenced that is unlikely to allow any serious revival of traditional forms of Protestant fundamentalism. 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 to 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.’<sup>1</sup>

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 (*white*) of contemporary youth spirituality at the far edge of the spectrum.

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

<sup>1</sup> Tacey, D., *Re-Enchantment*, Harper Collins, Sydney, 2000, p7.

## **Fundamentalist Youth Spirituality**

The appeal of certainty in increasingly uncertain times is, according to the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, what makes Western 'fundamentalism' a reactionary post-modern religious phenomena.<sup>2</sup> 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 (about which it is equally fundamentalist), and any type of postmodernism, with its abandonment of universal and propositional truth itself.

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 hypermodernist (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 is clearly very different to Protestant fundamentalism (fundamentalism proper).

Fundamentalism is a term that a distinct branch of Evangelical Protestants gave to themselves, and it has a very specific historical, doctrinal and methodological meaning. Evangelical Christianity was strongly influenced by the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment dismissal of tradition, the rejection of superstition, the embracing of science, the push for political and economic reform towards greater individual freedom, and an ease of association with infant nationalism. Fundamentalism, as a branch of Evangelicalism, with its more literalist reading of the Bible was a specific reactionary attempt to denounce both Liberal Protestant theology and modern science when they contradict the literalist reading of the Bible that is the authority base for fundamentalist certainty.

Clearly, Catholic, Orthodox, Jewish and Islamic thinking has never been as tied to an Enlightenment hermeneutic of Scripture. Protestant fundamentalism is thus a distinctly Western and modernist form of religious faith which is thus, in many regards, very unlike generically 'fundamentalist' faith which is called such simply because 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 Protestant fundamentalism which has been influenced by the Enlightenment. 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'.

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

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<sup>2</sup> Bauman, Z., 'Postmodern Religion?' in Heelas, P., (ed) Religion, Modernity and Postmodernity, Blackwell, Oxford, 1998, p 55 - 78

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. 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.<sup>3</sup>

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.

#### *Evangelical Youth Ministry to those with a fundamentalist spirituality*

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. 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 kerygmatic 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.

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<sup>3</sup> Maddox, M., *God Under Howard*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2005

## Hypermodern Youth Spirituality

I am using the word ‘hypermodern’ here to describe the combination of culturally postmodern beliefs with very modern practises of life 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,<sup>4</sup> 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 (a realist believes that the truth about reality is humanly knowable), yet neither is it explicitly anti-realist (anti-realists believe we can only know truths about our *perceptions* of reality). Philosophers call this hypermodern disinterest in truth irrealism - which simply doesn’t care about whether one makes any hard distinctions between reality and illusion, or truth and fiction, or not. It is only 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 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’ emphasis – 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. 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 behind 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 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

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<sup>4</sup> See Lyotard, J-F., *The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge*, Manchester University Press, 1984

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, in either an unreal manner, or even in something of an Augustinian realist manner. So, while appearing to be fundamentalist, it could move easily towards either irrealism proper, or post-secular belief. In this manner conservative dogmatism can straddle modernist truth and postmodernist truthlessness. For example, a Pentecostal doctrinal commitment to six 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 six 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.

### *Evangelical Youth Ministry to those with a hypermodernist spirituality*

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 means there is no conceptual difficulty in constructing 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 commodification 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.

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<sup>5</sup> Ritzer, G., *The McDonaldization Thesis*, Sage, USA, 1998

<sup>6</sup> Drane, J., *The McDonaldization of the Church*, Dartman, Longman & Todd, London, 2000, pp 80-81

## Relational Youth Spirituality

The qualitative researcher of contemporary Australian society Hugh MacKay has noticed that today's youth are 'returning to the tribe'. Whilst this is not only a younger generational movement 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. 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.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup> 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. Relationalism has no apparent interest in inherent or transcendentally 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.

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<sup>7</sup> 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](http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/07/12/1026185109842.html)

<sup>8</sup> See: [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20051225\\_deus-caritas-est\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html)

### *Evangelical Youth Ministry to those with a relational spirituality*

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 emerges from the classical Evangelical framing of the doctrine of penal substitution is morally absolutist. 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**

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.

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 irrationalism 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.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Milbank, J., *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1990. See also Blond, P., (ed) *Post-Secular Philosophy*, Routledge, London, 1998.

Milbank's thesis argues that 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 the theological rejection of the Augustinian spirituality of integrated participation. Thus Milbank argues that it is a distinctly theological innovation (heretical, as it happens) which rejects the notion of creation radically integrated into a divine harmony and gives us secular reason which 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 their integrated view of 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.

#### *Evangelical Youth Ministry to those with a radical post-secular spirituality*

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. 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.

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

Today, it is yellow (hypermodernism) 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 practice. Contemporary youth typically have no direct knowledge of the positivist scientific crisis in religion and the resentment about the regressive and hypocritical moral controls that Christian respectability previously exercised. 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 hypermodernism and consumerism in general dominate the cultural landscape of our youth at the moment, the 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 above 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. 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 (radical post-secularists), and, at the other end, the blues (modernist fundamentalists). 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.

### **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 universal and intrinsic human nature, made in the image of God, that can be appealed to in all cultural contexts. However, in contemporary Western Evangelical practice, 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. A tacit targeting does typically go on in Evangelical youth ministry, and as the effectiveness of youth ministry is often

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<sup>10</sup> Maddox, M., *God Under Howard*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2005

<sup>11</sup> Kingston, M., *Off the Rails: The Pauline Hanson Trip*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> 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](http://www.abc.net.au/rn/backgroundbriefing/stories/2006/1593326.htm)

<sup>13</sup> See Chesterton, G.K., *The Everlasting Man*, Ignatius Press, USA, 1993

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. 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.

I believe the Western Evangelical church, in general, is seriously spiritually compromised by the ease with which it associates with the dominant cultural norms of our times. There is a credible body of Evangelical literature that gives considered weight to this conviction.<sup>14</sup> 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.

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<sup>14</sup> 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](http://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.

## Conclusion

If our dominant youth spirituality is hypermodern, then the apparent pluralism of this outlook hides the underlying irrationalism that is the 'theology' of this spirituality, and the underlying egocentric experientialism that guides the 'religious' practises of this spirituality. Whether this irrationalist 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 practise 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 (relational and radical post-secularist) 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 (modernist and hypermodernist) 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.