Reconciling Christianity and Modernity: Australian Youth and Religion

Teresa Davis, University of Sydney
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Reconciling Christianity and Modernity: Australian Youth and Religion
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ABSTRACT

The growth of New Christian Movement Churches (such as the Pentecostal movements) in Australia is explored against a backdrop of falling attendance among the more ‘traditional’ churches (Catholic, Anglican etc). The powerful appeal of these New Christian Movement Churches (NCMs) to young people is studied through a series of interviews with young Australians using a phenomenological approach. The common threads from the enquiry are drawn together and mapped onto Lambert’s (1999) secularization of religion model. A ‘consequences of modernity’ (Giddens 1991) argument is used to understand how these NCMs fulfill the need that these young people feel to reconcile aspects of modernity with their religious beliefs.

INTRODUCTION:

This paper explores the seeming contradiction of the exponential growth of young Australians (15-29) engaging with ‘New Christian Movements’ (with a particular focus on the Pentecostal churches) and the growing numbers of ‘nominal’ or ‘non-religious’ Australians (ABS Census 2001).

This growth in NCMs is clearly visible on City University Campuses in Sydney and other cities in Australia. The Evangelical Union of the University of Sydney for example, claiming to be the largest student union body on campus (Evangelical Union website). The reasons why the youth of Australia are attracted to these New Christian Movements (NCMs) is explored through a series of phenomenological interviews.

The motives articulated by these young people in the interviews are studied for common threads and the reasons are compared to Lambert’s (1999) religion and modernity model in an attempt to better understand this ‘consumer segment’. This youth segment has been found to be notoriously difficult to reach by traditional churches (Kaldor 1987). This paper also attempts to understand better the primary characteristics of such NCMs and the power of their appeal to the youth segment. The rationalization of these movements and the close resemblance they bear to commercial/marketing bodies is explored in the context of ‘outcomes of modernity’ (Giddens 1991; Dobbelaere 1981; Dobbelaere and Jagodzinski 1995).

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT:

Young University students abandoning Mambo and Billabong for black t shirts with ‘Absolut God’ emblazoned on them were a common sight in Spring of 2002 on a major Sydney University campus. Cheerful young people wearing green and white ‘Evangelical Union’ T shirts were more visible than college (on campus fraternity-like organizations) colours during orientation week. University students who spend Saturday nights not in the local pub or nightclub, but crowding onto buses to attend a church in the suburbs is becoming a commonplace sight. Australian University Youth are spending a lot more time in church and church related activities than ever before (Sydney Morning Herald: Good weekend magazine).

Religion and young people are often viewed as an unlikely combination. The National Church Life Survey (NCLS) in Australia which conducts surveys every five years across most major Christian denominations provides a snapshot of church demographics in Australia. Their latest study (2001), has documented the common under-representation of young people in church (only 14% church goers are between 15-29 year olds). Kaldor (1987) noted that since the 1960s, it has been observed that young adults in Australia are less likely to be church attenders than those who are older and this gap appear to be widening as years go by. Age profile of church goers by majority, are in the 40-49 year olds (18%), 50-59 year olds (18%), 60-69 year olds (17%), and those in the 70+ age group (21%). Some denominations appear to be more appealing to young people than others. In the 15-29 year old group, some 30% attend Pentecostal denominations, 23% the Baptist church, and 22% the Churches of Christ. This is a stark comparison to the 12% who attend the Catholic Church, 11% the Anglican Church, and 8% the Uniting church (2001 National Church Life Survey).

As highlighted by Horsfield (in Ballis & Bouma, 1999), the youth segment is particularly difficult to attract segment among all denominations most churches have difficulties attracting and keeping youth within their ministries.

However the NCLS (2001) data clearly show that some types of churches (depending on the denomination) seem to be able to target and position themselves and their ideologies better than the more traditional churches. Are these differences in response to people’s changing spiritual tastes and needs or part of a fundamental shift in religious ideology?

As revealed by the latest national census in 2001, the two major denominations in Australia are Anglican and Catholic, which accounted for 46.5% of the population. Interestingly, the ‘no religion’ group has increased from 0.4% in 1901 to almost 17% by 1996, and around 25% in 2001. ‘No religion’ also implied people who chose not to answer the question as this is a voluntary question in the census.

Several reasons can be attributed to this downward trend. The influx of migrants from South-east Asia and the Middle East has seen the growth of Buddhism, Islam, and other religions in Australia. People also seem to be moving away from ‘traditional’ religion into New Age beliefs and values. Ireland (1999) noted a noticeable increase in Australia in new religious movements which offers alternative spiritual practices such as horoscopes, astrology, clairvoyants, psychic healing using crystals, and Eastern meditation.

While religious diversity begins to make a presence in Australia as well as the increase in the ‘no religion’ group, the proportion of people identifying themselves to a Christian denomination has decreased except for the Catholics, the Pentecostals, and Jehovah’s Witness. Of all Christian denominations in 1991, the most rapidly growing one are the Pentecostals. This trend is reflected worldwide as well. Brierley (1998) argues that Pentecostalism is a 20th century religious phenomenon whose rapid growth into the 21st century is unprecedented of any Christian denomination worldwide. It only represented 1% of the world’s Christian population in 1960, but will have grown to 8% by 2010.

As traditional denominations experience a decline in Australia, contemporary churches which are Pentecostal or charismatic in nature are thriving. Between the 1996 and 2001 census, The number of Pentecostals were up by 10%, double that of the Anglicans or Catholic (ABS figures cited in Quinlivan, 2002).

THE NEW CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT CHURCHES

An example of these New Christian Movement (NCMs) churches is the Hillsong Church in Sydney which attracts over
10,000 people in its 6 weekend services with an annual growth rate of 40%. The church engages in multiple business ventures. It has wide tele-evangelical services as well as a thriving music business. Unusually an album (Blessed) produced, written, and recorded by the Hillsong church was hit no. 4 at the ARIA (Australian Record Industry Association) charts in July 2002 outranking the likes of Shakira, Kylie Minogue, and Ronan Keating. A gospel album to be ranked with the likes of Eminem which was the no. 1 album at that time says a great deal about the popularity of such music among Australian youth.

The Hillsong church appears to overturn all traditional perceptions of a church. The church building is more corporate centre than cathedral. The services are usually shorter, featuring live ‘praise and worship’ (which often can be mistaken for a music concert!) with plenty of ‘performance’ elements. The pastor can be mistaken for a motivational speaker or talk show host (as one member of the church described it “going in there and seeing this man in a purple suit instead of a dog collar working the crowds.. it blew me away!”).

The style belongs more in the American South than urban Sydney, with faith healing, speaking in tongues and dramatic baptisms, but with a very ‘trendy’ modern theme to it. These churches have slick websites, some offering ‘online shopping’ of their books, CDs, and other Christian resources.

Many of these churches have built websites which range from simple informational brochure sites (usually only giving basic information such as the location of the church, service times, etc.) to more sophisticated content sites offering extensive information, resources, online shopping, sermon audio downloads in MP3 format, and email subscriptions for regular newsletters (for example, Kenneth Copeland Ministries at www.kcm.org).

The congregation of NCM churches mainly consists of people under 50 (73%), of these 30% are in the 15-29 age group and 43% in the 30-49 age group. This differs greatly in comparison with traditional (such as Catholic, Anglican, and Uniting) churches where only 8-12% of its congregations fall in the 15-29 age groups. These NCM churches also have thriving youth ministries, and often run specific programs and conferences (for example, www.planetshakers.com.au, www.youthalive.org.au) targeted towards the youth. These churches also seem to have revolutionized the Gospel music genre by developing contemporary style praise and worship sung by groups such as Delirious, who look like any modern rock band.

These churches have many of the features of the ‘Seeker’ movement in the United States where the philosophy is “Just as in the marketplace, you think of products and services that people need and how you create that; to some extent we’re looking at and recognizing spiritual needs that people have” (Richard Anderson of the Willow Creek Ministries, South Barrington, Illinois in Buss and Dale 2002).

**METHOD:**

These New Christian Movements (NCMs) have been especially remarkable in their ability to attract and retain the youth segment or ‘future consumers’. This aspect of targeting and attracting youth bears closer examination.

This exploratory study attempts to understand some of the reasons why such churches attract these young people while traditional congregations appear to be losing younger members. A phenomenological approach to understanding the religious/spiritual consumption experience of these young people was taken. A setting aside of assumptions and researchers own understanding (and biases) of the phenomenon was consciously adopted. The research purpose was seen as trying to understand the subject’s ‘lived experience’ (Goulding 1992). The recognition of the respondent’s reality of the consumption experience was allowed to lead the interpretation and analyses. Frameworks and structures of interpretation were therefore those suggested by the shape and tone of the interviews themselves.

**THE RESPONDENTS:**

These were chosen on a selective basis, picking subjects who have been through the particular consumption experience (affiliation with a New Christian Movement Church).

Five young people between the ages of 17-22 were recruited, comprising two males and three female respondents. They were all Sydney residents. One was in high school and one had been in the workforce for about a year; the other three were all at University. All of them could be described as high achievers (judged by the University/school and degree courses attended or the type of job held).

The interviews were carried out on campus of a major university in Sydney, Australia except in the case of the two who were not currently University students. The interviews ranged in time from 40 minutes to more than 2 hours in one case and were all audio-taped and later transcribed verbatim. Three of the interviewees belonged to or were affiliated to a single Pentecostal Church in Sydney. The interviews once transcribed were analysed for ‘common threads’ by identifying key ‘cue phrases’ were found. These were related to or mapped onto the ‘religion and modernity’ model suggested by Lambert (1999) to see if these instances of religious affiliation represented the rise of rationalized and commercialized ‘modern’ manifestations of religious commitment.

**COMMON THREADS:**

In each interview six common threads were identified. These can be described as follows:

1. **I consciously chose my church:** This took various forms. All interviewees were nominally Christian (born or socialized in the first few years of life into families that were practicing but not intensely Christian), but not committed Christians before they ‘chose’ their current church. The element of freedom to choose and having compared churches was clearly articulated by all the respondents. R(M21) for instance described this phase in his search as follows “I went shopping around for a belief; I looked at Islam and Buddhism, but Christianity was what did it, not that it has not increased my respect for other religions…”

2. **My relationship with God:** This was a personal thing—not necessarily mediated by the church, but facilitating it. The term ‘relationship’ appeared to be key with three of the interviewees repeating the phrase. R(M21) described it as ‘it’s not a social thing—many people see church as a way of socializing, For me its about knowing God, God got in touch, it was a personal connection.’. J (F 22) describes it as “Makes me understand the big picture through having a relationship with God” S (M 17) said “the church is a friend”. JA (F 22) went further “it’s a relationship at Hills (church)” “for me its not a compromise (referring to giving up Saturday nights drinking with friends at nightclub), its what I want to do, its about being passionately in love with the church, its been 6 years now and my spiritual needs are met and continuously being met, it keeps taking me to the next level’. “It’s a personal relationship with God”.

**THE CONCLUSION:**

To what extent do these young people have experienced a meaningful relationship with God? Are they able to articulate a personal experience of God? What are the implications of this for the church? Do these young people still feel secure in their religious affiliation or are they planning to leave? This is something that needs to be further explored. The implications of this research for the church and the future of Christianity in Australia are also important and need to be considered.
3. My spirituality not Religion: This was quite a strongly held view amongst the respondents. JA (F 22) says “I was religious, but this is so different from the Anglican (church) its more relevant, the message was about real life, not about solemn singing in church”. R (M21) says “Religion–(corrects himself) spirituality is something people use as an alternative to religion.”

1. My family and my beliefs: All the interviewees had concerns about the way their parents viewed their involvement with the church or religious organization. J(J 22) said “They (parents) were a bit cautious with my involvement in the EU (Evangelical Union), thought it’s a cult that’s taking over my whole life, after my cousins explained what it was they didn’t mind”. S (M17) says “They support me, my sister is getting more Christian, but my parents don’t go”. JA (F22) sees more resistance “My parents are wary of it K (sister) loves it, I am trying to get them to go, mum does sometimes but not dad. For themselves that’s not what they want- its no problem for them I attend”. R (M 21) feels saddened by it “they (family react) differently my mother is indifferent, the opposite of love is indifference not hate. She does not care, she is never curious about it (my faith). Its not just happiness, she is indifferent because I am happy in it- its about my relationship with my mother really”

5. My church is successful and that is not necessarily a bad thing: This was particularly true of the three respondents who had affiliations with the Pentecostal church. Each of them felt obliged to explain the money raising aspect of the church’s activities. One respondent (I21) described it as ‘anyway money I would have spent at a nightclub drinking with friends’ and that she was getting a lot more out of this and the music and dancing were very much a part of it and the atmosphere of a ‘nightclub without alcohol’ and where there were no concerns about other people’s motives in being friendly. The church was about being ‘relevant’ to young people. The church organized skateboard contests and had games to attract the young teens on a Friday night, while the young 20s crowd were pleased by the nightclub atmosphere and social aspects of the later evening gathering. Many members entered into business ventures with co-members and the church- the philosophy being one of “give and it shall be returned to you tenfold” (Meares 2003)

6. My belief is rational: This aspect was particularly highlighted for the sample (four of these respondents were in a leading Australian University in courses that required a 93% or more school leaving score-putting them in the top 10% academic achievement group in their cohort). One of these respondents addressed this issue with a Descartian logic –(God created man with reason so that this reason (as manifest in a religion cleansed by reason) would lead him back to God). R (M21) articulated this as “My friends question it, but philosophy can reconcile the (divergent) aspects of religion and science”. The Evangelical union on the campus of a major Australian University staged a debate between leading academics on the reason versus religion question this series called ‘Absolut God’ tapping into the cult status associations that Absolut vodka has among this target segment of urban youth.

MODERNITY AND RELIGION:

Lambert (1999) identified, using the arguments of many religious scholars (Nakamura 1986; Melton 1998; Bellah 1976; Tschanen 1992; Hervieu-Leger 1986; Champion 1993, Kurtz 1995) and many religious movements (Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism and Christianity etc) some overlapping characteristics from newer forms of religious movements. He identifies the following as common characteristics among such new and changing movements as shaped by the forces of modernity.

1. This worldliness: This indicates the movement of focus from the ‘next world/reincarnation’ to this world and man as the focus with a stress on ‘human love’, including the increasing value placed on the human body, moving away from asceticism (at the expense of fear and damnation). As Kitagawa (1967) says “ all classical religions tended to take negative attitudes toward phenomenal existence and recognized another realm of reality” (p.62). This is exactly that which has been overturned and as Lambert suggests instead that all religions are compelled to “find the meaning of human destiny in this world–in culture, society and human personality”. This focus on the material, present world was repeated in many forms among the respondents: The description of the churches business ventures often took this form, the sale of CDs in the church foyer before and after the service was seen as acceptable The images of Jesus clearing the temple of commerce or the worshipping of the golden calf that the traditional churches point to as anti-materialistic teaching are not focused on in these NCms. The Chief Pastor in a leading NCM church in Sydney is quoted in the Sydney Morning Herald’s Good Weekend Magazine (25th January 2003) as saying “If you believe in Jesus, he will reward you here on earth as well as in Heaven” and “ anyone who puts the Kingdom of Heaven first (rich or poor) can expect Bible Economics to work in their life now!”. The argument is that the money they (the churches) make comes from the promotion of Christian material and not worldly goods. In some cases it helped these churches seem more ‘relevant’-“they need to make a living” or “being successful is not a bad thing” and the quote of ‘give and it shall be returned to you tenfold’ offered as a sort of ‘fidelity in return for prosperity’ pledge, which was very much at odds with the traditional Christian churches stand on materialism.

2. The spirituality within: This is largely related to the idea of ‘individualization’ that is expressed by Bellah (1976) “Each individual must work out his own ultimate solutions, and the most the church can do is provide him a favourable environment for doing so, without imposing on him a prefabricated set of answers”(p309). Thomas Paine’s “my mind is my church” symbolizes this most clearly. Among our respondents this is articulated by R (M21) when he says that ‘spirituality is something people use as an alternative to religion’. This respondent’s reconciling of the reason vs religion (specifically the Creationism vs Evolution debate) reveals this need to have worked out the detail and having satisfied that philosophy can indeed reconcile these two issues ‘he grappled with’ in his mind convinced him of its validity.

3. Informality: Bellah (1976) points to this reduced distance between the faithful and God and between the faithful and
the church. Dobbelaere (1991) refers to this as a
dehierarchization–the bringing closer of the human and
the Divine. Lambert (1999) refers to the French Catholic
Church allowing the use of the ‘tu’ form when addressing
God in prayer rather than the formal ‘vous’. This is
illustrated both by J (F22) “It helps me understand the big
picture through having a relationship with God.” JA (F22)
speaks of “being passionately in love with the church.” and
R (M21) speaks of God having got in touch, and it being
a personal connection. The descriptions use language that
is significant- these are words these young people would
use to describe relationships with other people their age.
This is a God and Church that is young, contemporary and
relevant to them.

Americans found that 76% of them chose “going to church
/synagogue is something you do if it meets your needs” not
“it is a duty and an obligation”. Two thirds of this group
were ‘born again/ pentecostal’ Christians. The seeker
church philosophy referred to earlier uses this idea to great
advantage in their ‘market oriented approach’ to growing
their ministries. Among the respondents of this enquiry,
each of them articulated the idea of choice- none of them
are presently affiliated with the church they nominally
belonged to (born into, parents belonged to). There was a
conscious decision about their original churches ‘not sat-
isfying needs’ JA (F22) explained this as ‘the Anglican
church was so Anglo-Saxon- everybody knew each other and
anyone new got looked at; it was hard to break into;
(not for me, for newcomers) not very comfortable (for
newcomers); here (church of choice) you slip in and
become part of it’. R (M21) ‘I shopped around for a
belief...Islam, Buddhism...but this was it’ showed a cer-
tainty about the choice, and the exercise of conscious
choice.

5. Ritualism and Symbolism Transformed: This refers to
some of the earlier discussion of bringing the human and
the Divine closer. Much of the ritual and symbolism of
religion is intrinsically tied up with this need to demystify.
However in many cases the shift has been from mystery to
performance. The theatricality of faith healing, speaking
in tongues or of public baptisms in a swimming pool
suspended above a 3500 strong crowd creates a dramatic
element of performance. Other rituals are more mundane
and involve the focus on human interaction. Social inter-
action is a function the church has served for centuries, the
rituals are transformed, but still have the same purposes.
The Friday evening meetings now simulate the nightclub
without alcohol instead of a community meeting place it
was in the past.

The opinion of Giddens (1991) that “rather than entering a
period of post-modernism, we are moving into one in which the
consequences of modernity are becoming more radicalized and
universalized than before” appears to hold for the Christian reli-
gious movement in Australia. While post modernism has entered
other social movements in Australia, one could argue that the
NCMs do not display the hallmarks of post-modernity such as the
‘disqualification’ of the great narratives. There is rather a reverting
to an adapted, rationalized and transformed narrative of Christian-
ity that is more compatible with the modernist’s ideology of endless
progression rather than a postmodern tearing down of old mytholo-
gies and narratives. In some instances it is marked by the return to
some aspects of religious fundamentalism such as a conservative
attitude to the homosexualit and abortion (Meares 2003). In many
ways this may be seen as no more than an echo of the rise of the
Pentecostal brand of Christianity in other parts of the world. In fact
going by global figures, Australia lags far behind that of North and
South America (Brierley 1998) in the growth of the Charismatic or
Pentecostal church. Many of the NCM churches in Australia are
linked to the ‘Assembly of God’ governing body which is based in the
USA. These may explain some of the common features of philosophy and worship that appear in both the North American and
Australian NCMs.

Insights
The one dominant theme that runs through all the interviews is
the idea that these churches (NCMs) were helping meet their
(young Australians’) need to reconcile or in someway bring the
traditional Christian faith they were socialized in and their contem-
porary lives together. This reconciliation of modernity and Chris-
tian teaching, achieved through some broad reinterpretations of the
‘old’ church teachings and with an overlay of social accessibility and
an element of ‘entertainment’ has put the NCMs in the position
of seeing their young ministries grow in ways the traditional
churches have not. The NCMs in Australia are no longer being
dismissed as irrelevant to the spiritual and material needs of young
people as they may have been in the past (by their parents’
generation) (Brierley 1998), there are significant numbers of young
people being attracted to these churches. It is unclear however how
many of these people will stay with the church in the long term.
Some of them are positioned primarily as ‘young churches and
therefore may lose current members as they grow older and move
away. This is particularly true for the sample looked at. University
education over, these young people will move as careers take them
elsewhere. Thus retention rates may be as much of a problem as with
traditional churches. It may even appear to be a ‘positioning’ and
‘segmenting’ strategy at work here. Young people being attracted
to the NCMs early in life but who may in different stages of their life,
move onto traditional churches or drop out of church and become
nominal or non-attending members of churches.

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FIGURE 1
Modernity and Religion Reconciled

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Worldliness or The rise of capitalism</th>
<th>The Spirituality Within or secularization arising from globalization</th>
<th>Informality or dehierarchization</th>
<th>Freedom to Choose Or Individual consciousness and freedom</th>
<th>Ritualism and Symbolism Transformed or substitution of religious tradition rationalism</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rationalism of materialism</td>
<td>Spirituality over Religion</td>
<td>Personal connection/relation ship with God</td>
<td>Active choice over passive nominalism</td>
<td>New rituals for the modern</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Otherwise, I would have spent it at a nightclub on drinks and I get so much more here

Spirituality is something people use as an alternative to Religion

God got in touch, it’s a personal connection

I shopped around for a belief

Nightclub without the alcohol

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meares, A (2003)</td>
<td>“Praise the Lord and pass the chequebook” in the Good Weekend magazine supplement of the Sydney Morning Herald (January 25th)</td>
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