

Countering Commodification: A Review of Recent Research and Writings On Youth, Young Adults and Religion

by

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When I began teaching youth ministry twenty-five years ago, there was little research available and very few books that offered substantive discussion of youth, their faith, and the role of the church in nurturing that faith. Programmatic books abounded, mainly from Group publishing and Youth Specialties, with some resources from mainline denominational publishers. Many of these books seemed to be modeled after a “Young Life” approach to youth ministry, depending on gimmicky activities that promised entertainment with some kind of a devotional point at the end that often seemed to me to be a stretch. I was frustrated by not finding solid theologically grounded material to share with students preparing to work with young people in the church.

At the time, I found only a few resources I deemed suitable. For my course on youth ministry, I found William Myers’ *Theological Themes of Youth Ministry*,¹ a small book rich with theological insight and wisdom based on experience with adolescents. Based on the church year, the book offered in-depth discussion of the ways theology meets some of the deep hungers of adolescents. I also discovered Charles Shelton’s *Adolescent Spirituality*,² written from a Roman Catholic perspective, to be a book that provided both spiritual and psychological insight. For practical planning, I used Ginny Ward Holderness’s *Youth Ministry: the New Team Approach*,³ because it was an alternative to the reigning “pied piper” model of hiring a cool young seminarian with a guitar to handle youth ministry in the church.

For years, I used these books because I could not find any other substantive resources to share with my students. In academic circles, youth ministry was looked down upon, considered a subject for practice, but not for practical theology.

¹ William Myers, *Theological Themes of Youth Ministry* (Pilgrim, 1987).

² Charles Shelton, *Adolescent Spirituality* (Loyola, 1983).

³ Ginny Ward Holderness, *Youth Ministry: the New Team Approach* (John Knox, 1981).

Meanwhile, as a professor of educational ministry, I was regularly asked by local churches and judicatories to come tell them “how to keep the kids in the church.” This was my first hint of the extent to which youth were viewed as a commodity of which the church was either in short supply or was anxious about losing. This made sense of the dearth of substantive books, as the church seemed intent on providing an “entertainment model” of youth ministry that privileged games and gimmicks as ways to attract young people to church.

Over the past eighteen years, the Lilly Endowment has changed this picture. As the 2010 Annual report on this website puts it, the Religion Division of the Endowment has awarded “a series of strategic grants (totaling more than \$108 million) to help pastors and church leaders assess, re-imagine and enhance their ministries for young people.”

The need for re-imagining is staggering. It is staggering because youth ministries sit squarely in a church that lives in a culture that has been overtaken by consumerism. Katherine Turpin, in her book *Branded*, reminds us that consumer culture is not only “a system of economic engagement in the world,” but also “a story of meaning and purpose to define human existence.” Specifically, consumer culture “offers the story that the key to a good life lies in acquiring enough money to obtain the goods that offer happiness, status, protection, and comfort.”⁴

Many of us would recognize this story as a narrative that we hope to help adolescents recognize and critique from a biblical perspective. But Turpin claims that approaching consumer ideology as an educational problem to be solved by increasing critical consciousness about the consumer culture in which adolescents were living is not sufficient. “I came to realize that the problem ran much deeper than cognitive awareness: at stake was the shaping of imagination, agency, and the most basic structures of meaning-making.”⁵

Turpin names the deeper problem: “Simply being aware of the ways in which consumer culture works in the U.S. and its ecological and economic impact on the rest of the world is not enough to transform the power it has to define our sense of the world and how it works. What has to be transformed is not our *understanding* of consumer culture, but *our faith in it*.”⁶

Jack Miles, a senior fellow with the Pacific Council on International Policy, agrees with Turpin’s assessment and suggests that churches and synagogues and mosques whose members live in the midst of a consumerist culture, need to recognize that “a struggle is underway between commitment and unchecked

⁴ Katherine Turpin, *Branded: Adolescents Converting from Consumer Faith* (Pilgrim, 2006) p. 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*

commodification.”⁷ The thesis of Miles’ essay (written as a response to the presenters at an international conference titled “Faith, Fear and Indifference: Constructing the Religious Identity of the Next Generation”) is that, in the United States, the encounter of religion with secularism has been overtaken by the encounter of both with American consumerism. “Consumerism,” says Miles, “is as subversive of, and yet as compatible with, secularism as it is with religion.”⁸

This seems like a plausible explanation for the predominant “faith” Christian Smith and Melinda Denton encountered in their study of youth and religion, which they named “moral therapeutic deism.”⁹ They summarize it as follows.

(1) Moral: “Central to living a good, happy life is being a good moral person. That means being nice, kind, respectful, responsible, at work on self-improvement, taking care of one’s health, and doing one’s best to be successful.”¹⁰

(2) Therapeutic: “What appears to be the actual dominant religion among U.S. teenagers is centrally about feeling good, happy, secure, at peace. It is about attaining subjective well-being, being able to resolve problems, and getting along amiably with other people.”¹¹

(3) Deism: “God exists, created the world, and defines our general moral order, but [is] not one who is particularly personally involved in one’s affairs—especially affairs in which one would prefer not to have God involved.”¹²

Smith and Denton posit that Moral Therapeutic Deism is a “faith” that the youth whom they interviewed learned from their parents and adults in the congregations in which they were raised:

Any generation gap that exists between teens and adults today is superficial compared with and far outweighed by generational continuities. Contemporary teenagers have almost entirely bought into the mainstream social system, literally anxious above all to succeed on its terms. They are well socialized to want to enjoy the consumerist and experiential benefits of U.S. society as much as they are able.

Kenda Creasy Dean names the issue as a theological one in the title (*Almost Christian*) of her response to Smith & Denton’s study.¹³ She asks:

⁷ Jack Miles, “The Leisure of Worship and the Worship of Leisure,” in James Heft, S.M., ed. *Passing on the Faith: Transforming Traditions for the Next Generation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims* (Fordham Univ. Press, 2006) p. 254.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

⁹ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), p. 162.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp 163-164.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 164.

What if the blasé religiosity of most American teenagers is not the result of poor communication but the result of excellent communication of a watered-down gospel so devoid of God’s self-giving love in Jesus Christ, so immune to the sending love of the Holy Spirit that it might not be Christianity at all? What if the *church* models a way of life that asks, not passionate surrender but ho-hum assent? ¹⁴

Dean uses the analogy of a symbiote, “the weaker of two organisms inhabiting the same space so that the weaker can draw life from the stronger,”¹⁵ in order to make sense of the phenomenon of Moral Therapeutic Deism. She points to Smith and Denton’s suggestion that this faith of “ho-hum assent” appears to be “simply colonizing many established religious traditions and congregations in the United States, becoming the new spirit living in an old body.”¹⁶

This colonization (or symbiosis) makes sense, they say, because the culturally pervasive therapeutic individualism’s ethos “perfectly serves the needs and interests of U.S. mass-consumer capitalist economy by constituting people as self-fulfillment-oriented consumers subject to advertising’s influence on their subjective feelings...”¹⁷

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is the fruit of a consumer culture that is, as Turpin reminded us, not only “a system of economic engagement in the world,” but also “a story of meaning and purpose to define human existence.”¹⁸

As James Heft, the editor of *Passing on the Faith*, puts it, “It may well be that at the end of the day the deepest influence on parents, teenagers, and college students is a democratic, affluent culture of consumption and choice.”

From my perspective, the research and writings the Lilly Endowment has funded over the past fifteen years have in common a concern to challenge the Church’s temptation to simply accommodate to the excesses (and more subtle lures) of American consumer culture.

For too long churches have operated with a model of commodifying youth as desirable products for congregations to attract in order to show them off to prove their “vitality.” Many of the writings I am reviewing in this essay name rampant consumerism and the attendant commodification of everything and everyone as an insidious problem in American Christianity. In some of the works, it is not

¹³ Kenda Creasy Dean. *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2010).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁶ Smith and Denton, p. 166.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

¹⁸ Turpin, p. 4.

explicitly dwelt upon, but lurks as the backdrop for the issues of youth and young adult ministry the works are seeking to address.

All of the works reviewed point to the need for congregations to reassess both the way they *understand* and how they *present* their faith, not only to young people, but to *all* people, since all, young and old, are subject to the market forces that are encroaching on every aspect of human life.

The book that deals most explicitly with the issue is Turpin’s book *Branded: Adolescents Converting from Consumer Faith*. We have already seen the way she names the problem of consumer capitalism as a competing “faith” that “runs much deeper than intellectual assent to an economic system or even the mindless mimetic behavior of consumption.”¹⁹ She puts it baldly:

It implies a faithful dependency that orders the self at a primary level. Humans trust in and count upon the meaning system of consumer capitalism to make sense of reality and themselves, even if they would not use this language to describe their own faith.²⁰

Turpin’s book is especially helpful for the church’s understanding of the challenges of working with youth because she names a significant problem in the way the church seeks to address consumerism. Too often, she points out, educational efforts simply “set up two meaning systems, Christian and consumer, as oppositional and ask adolescents to simply choose between the two.”²¹ This is a problem because simply becoming aware of one’s captivity to consumer culture is not enough. “To change understanding without changing *desires* is to create a miserable human being, caught between their changed insight and their characteristic patterns of knowing and being in the world.”²²

Her solution is to turn to John Wesley’s understanding of conversion as the mechanism of transforming our desires. One must be grasped by a new vision that “reinterprets one’s life in a fundamental way”²³ in order to move beyond the sense of simply being trapped in a consumerist identity.

Turpin identifies and explores processes of conversion. They include: (1) awakening (2) repentance (3) justification (4) regeneration. Small pedagogical communities that provide support and accountability are a key strategy.

In order for small groups to nurture ongoing conversion, they should have the following: “an atmosphere of grace, confessional honesty, accountability in light

¹⁹ Turpin, p. 40.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 71

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

of confession, a rhythmic pattern of common life, richness of imagery and worship, opportunities for nonconsumptive celebration, opportunities to live into new imaginations together, and encouragement for corporate self-critique.”²⁴

A particularly helpful insight is Turpin’s acknowledgement that the process of conversion requires small groups that have the ability to tolerate the ambiguity of the process of undergoing transformation.

“People in the midst of ongoing conversion often display commitments to multiple faith systems in various degrees; they are faithful to *both* consumer meaning systems and their new alternative imaginations at the same time ... The recognition of the conflicted nature of faithfulness is a critical component of providing an atmosphere of grace.”²⁵

Small groups allow for practice of living into the new vision and offer accountability in a context of grace. Turpin emphasizes the importance of practice as a critical element in changing consciousness and commitment.

However, small groups, alone, cannot accomplish this work. They must stay in touch with those victimized by consumer culture in order to be reminded of why the gospel vision is the more compelling way of making meaning of human existence:

With its ubiquitous, beautiful images of style and ease, consumer culture masks its costs to persons who labor to produce goods cheaply and to the earth that provides the raw materials which keep consumption moving...Thus, work in partnership with those who are victimized by consumer culture can help maintain the vision of why an alternative is important.²⁶

This is why having direct contact with people outside of our usual circles through study trips, service projects and work camps is an important component of youth ministry.

Turpin also reminds us that faith in consumer capitalism is not only a problem of adolescents, but permeates adult culture, as well. It is insidious, for even those who struggle with consumer ideology find that the ideology often “goes underground rather than disappears” as we get older:

We may become more skillful in our navigation of the ideology of consumer capitalism and *more refined* in our self-deception about its importance to us rather than *less dependent upon it* as a meaning system that makes sense of our world. We may find ourselves worrying more about retirement savings and the

²⁴ Ibid., p. 195.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 198.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 217.

value of stock portfolios rather than name-brand shoes, but *both worries seek salvation in having money to acquire possessions.*²⁷

Naming adult self-deception when it comes to our captivity to consumer cultural values is a significant contribution of this literature for those seeking to understand and work with youth. This connection between what adults model and what adolescents absorb from the adult culture around them helps make sense of the concern about “moral therapeutic deism” raised in Smith and Denton’s book, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*.

Their research showed that, contrary to common perceptions that youth are not religious, they are in fact, both religious and conventionally so: “When it comes to practicing religion, most U.S. teens appear happy to go along and get along.”²⁸ The researchers found that “the vast majority are happy simply to accept the one religion in which they were raised.”²⁹

The surprise coming out of the research that Smith and Denton conducted was their conclusion that “any generation gap that exists between teens and adults today is superficial compared with and far outweighed by generational continuities.”³⁰ They emphatically claim “the single most important societal influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents.”³¹

The authors are critical of the way adults deflect their role in creating and maintaining a consumerist model of human being (including our approach to religion): “Instead of owning this responsibility, however, adults typically frame adolescence in ways defining teenage life per se as *itself* a social problem...”³²

The authors seek to correct this way of seeing adolescence by presenting their research into adolescent views of religion as a mirror of adult views. “One of the biggest obstacles to our understanding teenager’ lives is the common apparent inability to see their lives within the larger, very powerful social and cultural context that forms it.”

I would suggest that this inability to see is connected to the self-deception of which Turpin speaks, wherein adults, who have become “skillful in our navigation of the ideology of consumer capitalism and *more refined* in our self-deception

²⁷ Ibid., p. 19.

²⁸ Smith and Denton, p. 260.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Smith and Denton, p. 264.

³¹ Ibid, p. 261.

³² Ibid.

about its importance to us,”³³ simply pass on a watered down faith that will not challenge the importance of consumer capitalism as the reigning system of meaning-making in the culture of the United States.

This, in turn, leads to the situation the researchers found: “Most U.S. teens have a difficult to impossible time explaining what they believe, what it means, and what the implications of their beliefs are for their lives.”³⁴ This is not surprising, if it is true that adults are not willing to delve deeply into understanding the implications of their own faith commitments for fear it might mean changing a comfortable life-style by going against the cultural grain of our consumer society.

Adults who care about helping youth shape a vital, life-affirming faith must examine the role their own lifestyle and religious commitments play in shaping youth perceptions of faith. Smith and Denton’s research, not surprisingly, found that “religious congregations that prioritize ministry to youth and support for their parents, invest in trained and skilled youth group leaders, and make serious efforts to engage and teach adolescents are more likely to draw youth into their religious lives and to foster religious and spiritual maturity in their young members.”³⁵

While this seems to state the obvious, it is worth noting that such prioritizing of resources for ministry to youth and support for their parents requires faith communities to direct those resources to recognize the larger forces at work:

It is not sufficient to focus only on teenagers’ individual psychological issues or moral character or smart or poor choices and behaviors, for those are often themselves powerfully shaped by the social and cultural forces of therapeutic individualism, mass-consumer capitalism, the structural disconnect of teenagers from the world of adults, adults’ own problems, and other relevant cultural and social contradictions and tensions.³⁶

Smith and Denton’s research has made a significant contribution to youth ministry by naming the larger societal issues that must be addressed in order to assist youth in coming to a robust faith that is a more active and important part of their lives. They have pointed to the importance of ministry to parents and other adults in churches who are the models and mentors of the youth. They suggest the model of youth ministry should not simply be one of pulling teens away from their parents, but of focusing on parents as “indispensable partners in the

³³ Turpin, p. 19.

³⁴ Smith and Denton, p. 262.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 261-262.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 263

religious formation of youth.”³⁷ Youth want to relate to adults. Adults need to “invest time, attention and readiness to be open and vulnerable” in order to build “sustained, meaningful, personal adult relationships with the teens.”³⁸

Nor should parents and other adults be afraid to teach teens. Smith and Denton point out that “there seems to be a curious reluctance among many adults to teach teens when it comes to faith. Adults often seem to want to do little more than ‘expose’ teens to religion.”³⁹ The authors encourage more explicit teaching to help youth (and parents) *articulate* their faith commitments.

Here, too, the challenge is one for the adults, as well, since articulating as well as practicing, faith commitments may demand counter-cultural practices:

Religious communities that are interested in the faith formation of their youth simply must better address the structural competition of other, not always supportive institutions and activities. This will likely require developing new and creative norms, practices, and institutions appropriate to specific religious situations and traditions.⁴⁰

Kenda Creasy Dean picks up this theme of counter-cultural practice in her book, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*. She calls for “missional imagination” as an antidote to “moral therapeutic deism.”

Instead of lowest-common-denominator Christianity in which everyone is happy if people just get along, missional churches ratchet up expectations by consciously striving to point out, interpret, and embody the excessive nature of God’s love. They intentionally, willingly, joyfully practice Jesus’ last-shall-be-first ethic of giving and purposefully refrain from doing much in the way of institutional self-preservation.⁴¹

In an earlier work, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church*, Dean had taken on what she called “the heresy of wholesomeness.”⁴² She critiques the early twentieth century religious education movement, suggesting that “in the absence of an adequate Christology – namely, one that retained a central place for the passion of God – the practices of faith that once

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 270.

⁴¹ Dean, p. 89.

⁴² Kenda Creasy Dean. *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 36.

celebrated our ‘oddity’ as Christians easily became domesticated as vehicles of wholesomeness.”⁴³ She seems to be suggesting that the roots of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism are deeply entwined with what she sees as the cultural accommodation of the early religious education movement as it reacted to some of the excesses of revivalism.

Mimesis of Jesus Christ does not create ‘good teenagers’ or ‘wholesome youth programs.’ It creates radicals and prophets — people who reveal the root of cultural deceits with the searchlight of Christ’s love, and who unmask avarice, violence, rivalry, and smallness, exposing them like the Wizard of Oz behind the curtain. And like the Wizard, the ideologies of self-fulfillment can no longer intimidate once the humbug has been revealed.⁴⁴

“At the end of the day,” says Dean, “making disciples requires incarnation, not cultural adaptation.”⁴⁵

Perhaps one of the most important statements in her book *Almost Christian* is: “Christ views young people as participants in God’s mission rather than targets of ours.”⁴⁶ Here she is taking on the consumer model that commodifies young people, treating them as objects of our mission to grow our churches, and instead, treating them as subjects involved in God’s mission in the world. She elaborates:

A missional imagination assumes that young people take part in the church’s mission — that every Christian teenager is a missionary called to translate the gospel across boundaries, not because she is capable or even interested but because she is baptized and is therefore sent into the world as Christ’s envoy.⁴⁷

When teens are invited to participate in the church’s mission, a missional imagination takes root in them and they “begin to view the world as a place where God acts, and see themselves as participants in Gods actions.”⁴⁸

Dean claims that congregations have tools for cultivating missional imagination and consequential faith in teens. In *Practicing Passion*, she draws on recent conversations on Practices growing out of the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and

⁴³ Ibid., p. 37.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 48.

⁴⁵ Dean, *Almost Christian*, p. 105.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 97.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

carried on in the work of current practical theologians.⁴⁹ Communal practices such as praying, singing, testifying, providing hospitality, interpreting scripture, forgiving, and stewardship are only a few among many of these practices that cultivate Christian faith in congregations. These practices are grounded in our experiences of God’s practices of: fidelity (being there), transcendence (being moved) and communion (being known).⁵⁰ In *Almost Christian*, Dean lifts up three tools (that draw on some of these practices): translation, testimony and detachment.

In speaking about *translation*, Dean offers the following intriguing perspective:

Approaching mission as translation assumes Christ is already present in [young people’s] lives, even those without noticeable faith, long before we arrive on the scene...the gospel of Jesus Christ is God’s living translation—and requires living translations as well, people who offer fresh perspectives on Jesus, on young people, and on the church itself.⁵¹

Dean is clear that Christians who work with teens need to understand themselves as “living translations” because “faith is a way of life, not only a body of information.”⁵² She is not rejecting information as important in the Christian life, simply placing it in its proper place in the process of cultivating faith. She discusses it under the category of *testimony*: “If language has world-creating power, a theological vocabulary that helps us talk about God also helps us imagine what a God-shaped world looks like.”⁵³

Dean describes why she finds the word testimony empowering as we think about cultivating faith:

To my mind, the provisional interpretive nature of testimony gives the practice a kind of humility—and a gut-level honesty—that sometimes evades other forms of human speech. We never have the absolute truth about God; we have only the corner of the truth God has revealed to us, and we must rely on the Holy Spirit to help the hearer fill in the rest.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ For example, Craig Dykstra. *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*. (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1999); Dorothy C. Bass. *Practicing Our Faith*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998); Miroslav Volf. *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); and [specifically for youth], Dorothy C. Bass and Don Richter. *Way to Live*. (Nashville: Upper Room, 2002).

⁵⁰ Dean, *Practicing Passion*, p. 143.

⁵¹ Dean, *Almost Christian*, p. 105.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 117.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

Testimony is a powerful tool for cultivating faith because of its honesty and the way it functions to reveal us as the “living translations” of God’s mission in the world. Those who work with teens need to be willing to testify and to help young people develop the theological vocabulary that will help them see God’s work in them and bear witness to it. Unfortunately, those in mainline churches have tended to steer away from testimony, for fear it will appear too “evangelical.” We need to reexamine our assumptions and recognize that the kind of “humility and gut-level honesty” that can characterize testimony is sorely needed in our churches today if we are to counter the shallow entertainment culture that is so pervasive in consumer culture.

Dean’s third tool for cultivating consequential faith is *detachment*. She describes it as the creation of liminal spaces where we meet God by going out of our comfort zones to places and people who see Jesus from a different perspective than ours. This has a decentering effect that opens us to an enlarged perspective on who God is. This is why service projects, work camps and prayer practices are powerful contexts for cultivating faith in young people. Like Turpin, Dean believes that exposure to those who are victimized by consumer capitalism leads to new awareness and the possibility of the kind of transformation Turpin calls conversion.

“The gift of these decentering encounters with ‘otherness’ — the human other and the Divine Other — is faithful *reflexivity*, a kind of self-awareness that allows us to momentarily view ourselves and others from a new vantage point as we watch God work...”⁵⁵ This reflexivity is crucial for breaking the cycle of captivity to our consumer-driven culture. Dean asks the question, “What if an adolescent we know actually *does* identify with the God of the cross, and therefore does love something truly, with the kind of passion that exposes all lesser loves, including the greedy, self-fulfilling ones on which human society stands?”⁵⁶

Translation, testimony and detachment are key tools for helping teens forge a Christian identity that is both deeply rooted *and* flexible enough to be lovingly responsive to God’s call. Both of Dean’s books are rich resources for grounding ministry with youth in the rich, multifaceted practices of the church, practiced with faithful adults who incarnate the gospel alongside the young people with whom they are in ministry in God’s name.

Sociologist of Religion Carol E. Lytch, in her book *Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens*, claims “‘passing on the faith’ is no longer the task it used to be. Teens choose faith instead.”⁵⁷ Based on her study of young people in three congregations with vital youth programs in Louisville, Kentucky, Lytch

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

⁵⁶ Dean, *Practicing Passion*, p. 48.

⁵⁷ Carol E. Lytch. *Choosing Church: What Makes a Difference for Teens*. (Louisville: Westminster-John Knox, 2004), p. 13.

concluded that teens choose to be active in churches that “get beyond the superficial solutions to youth ministry and address teens’ deep human needs to belong, to believe, and to be competent.”⁵⁸ Her research corroborates Kenda Creasy Dean’s assertion that congregations *do* have the tools to cultivate consequential faith in teens: “Congregations that both teach youth the Christian way of life and create conditions where teens feel they meet God tend to have large numbers of teens who predict that they will continue to be active in the church after they leave home.”⁵⁹

But this is not always easy to achieve. One factor that Lytch, like the authors we have already discussed, is concerned about is the power of consumer-driven values on U.S. teens. She notes that

hyped consumerism and the pervasive influence of commercial advertising have gradually changed the environment in which teens have grown up since WWII. More than ever before, teens are viewed as a market, a viable consumer group with opinions, tastes, and buying habits worth cultivating for the billions of dollars that teens have at their disposal.⁶⁰

This climate of hyper-consumerism plays into the fact that teens view themselves as having a plethora of choices in all areas of life, including religion. Lytch sees “the heightened sense of personal autonomy” as the thread that runs through her study, suggesting that it alters how teens today view their religious tradition.⁶¹

She comments, “Some church-affiliated teens are reared to view religion as a mode of individual self-expression and as a means to achieve one’s own ends.”⁶² U.S. culture’s drive toward success as defined by consumer values also affects family and community systems:

The nature of community is radically altered for this generation. Today, parent/teen social networks are looser. Thick webs of relationships yielded by multiplex relations—the overlapping face-to-face relationships among key people in the teen’s life—no longer tie home, school, and church into a coherent moral and religious community.... Without parent/teen social networks linking relationships across settings, some teens develop modal personalities that shift according to the social world in which they find themselves at the moment.⁶³

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

Among the high school seniors Lytch studied, she identifies seven types of religious teens: The first type she calls “Conventionals,” teens for whom Christian tradition provides the structures of identity, defining the boundaries of their self-presentation, their relationships, and their sense of morality.⁶⁴ A second type, “Classics,” are more open to adapting to more contemporary expressions of Jesus and to new theological ethical reflection.⁶⁵ A third type, “Reclaimers,” are those who have broken with their tradition of faith, subsequently had an intense experience of God, then reclaimed the tradition in a very serious way.⁶⁶

The fourth type Lytch names, “Marginalizers,” are believers, but belief in God does not dominate their thoughts, nor does it self-consciously shape their lifestyle or life plan.⁶⁷ Like many of the youth in Smith and Denton’s study, they are “looking for a career defined by the market, not a life’s work discerned through prayer as a ‘calling.’”⁶⁸ The next type, “Customizers,” are ‘seekers’ who take belief seriously, without the trappings of the institutional church. They crave a personal experience of God and “tend to be more ‘loose’ in personal morals, while often acting ethically regarding social justice involvement.”⁶⁹

The last two types Lytch identifies are those uninvolved in the church. “Rejecters” are those who have opted out of the church tradition in which they were raised, often after serious study. “They do not accept the imposition of consumerism, the standards of style, the codes of conformity, or even the endowments of nature to dictate how they appear,” and they “tend to substitute something in place of the Christian symbols and narratives—either a philosophy or...’practical consciousness.’”⁷⁰ The “Lost,” are teens who have been underexposed to religious tradition and “are on tracks structured by the market and government, channeling them toward a career after high school graduation.”⁷¹

Lytch concludes, from this range of types of religiosity (or not!) in teens, that religious traditions still function as a source for self-identity, but they are modified by a genuine sense of choice, “borne out in voluntary and selective religiosity.”⁷²

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 99.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 103.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 105.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 108.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 113.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 123.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 130.

⁷² Ibid., p. 134.

Lytch found that the congregations who adapted to the new climate of personal choice attracted large numbers of teens: “Each of the three traditions (evangelical, Catholic and United Methodist) adapted *in its own way* to large societal change and to the culture of choice, and that is why they are effective.”

In other words, there is no one-size-fits-all model for youth ministry. However, Lytch observed that there were three factors that congregations with large youth programs had in common:

Congregations that attract large numbers of youth do so by offering teens a sense of *belonging* that ties them into the fellowship of their church, a sense of the comprehensive meaning of the whole of life that is based in religious truth (*believing*), and opportunities to develop various *competencies* that assist them as they cross the threshold into adult roles and institutions.⁷³

Over the years that I have been teaching youth ministry, I have found these three factors (belonging, believing and developing competencies) most useful for igniting the imagination of those engaged in ministry with youth. They are broad and flexible enough to accommodate the changing nature of the culture, while taking advantage of the riches of the Christian theological tradition for providing the kind of “consequential faith” of which Kenda Creasy Dean speaks.

Lytch is not alone in seeking to ask questions about what draws young people to or away from, church. The book, *Passing on the Faith: Transforming Traditions for the Next Generation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims*, edited by James Heft, S.M., is based on an international conference titled, “Faith, Fear and Indifference: Constructing the Religious Identity of the Next Generation,” which drew speakers from Europe and North America addressing the question of passing on religious traditions—Christian, Jewish and Muslim—to youth in the context of contemporary culture.⁷⁴ The book seeks to show how three religious traditions can “pass on to their next generation of believers a robust and vital understanding and practice of their faiths.”⁷⁵

The volume begins with two essays seeking to paint the religious landscape both around the world and in the United States. Author Melchor Sánchez de Toca says of the world scene that in Europe secularization remains strong. While the peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America remain deeply religious, the intellectual elite of those countries are often secular. It is in the West that the “deconfessionalization” (spiritual but not religious) movement is growing, along

⁷³ Ibid., p. 198.

⁷⁴ James Heft, S.M., ed. ”*Passing on the Faith: Transforming Traditions for the Next Generation of Jews, Christians, and Muslims.*(New York: Fordham Univ. Press, 2006).

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 6-7.

with increasing indifference to religion.⁷⁶ Sociologist Nancy Ammerman identifies two cultural trends that challenge the passing on of religious faith in the United States. They are diversity (because of religious pluralism) and skepticism (because of the rise of the scientific method making religious claims suspect).⁷⁷

These essays are followed by three chapters presenting national studies on religious attitudes among youth and young adults in the United States. The first, by Christian Smith, presents the findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion. The second one, by Jennifer Lindholm of the Higher Education Research Institute of the University of Southern California, presents data on how young adults on college campuses think about spirituality and its role in their lives. This study, carried out over many years, starting in 1966, has found that the number of students claiming ‘none’ as their religious preference has nearly tripled, though the number still remains relatively low at 17.6 percent in 2003.⁷⁸

The 2003 survey indicated that the majority of students surveyed indicate an awareness of, and connection with the spiritual dimension of their lives.⁷⁹ While spirituality tends to be defined as an “individual” thing, for many surveyed, personal spirituality “has important implications for connecting with others.”⁸⁰ Lindholm reports that the “the vast majority perceive distinct differences between spirituality and religion and viewed the relationship between the two as highly variable.”⁸¹ (It is interesting to note that this is what Chris Smith expected to find among the teens he surveyed, but didn’t. It seems to be a phenomenon that emerges in young adulthood.)

A finding of the study worth noting, particularly for those of us in higher education, is that, in the students’ perception, professors tend to steer away from topics that are controversial, such as spirituality:

While considerable numbers of students (75%) are searching for meaning and purpose in life, many (56%) reported that their professors never provide opportunities to discuss the meaning and purpose of life. Similarly, nearly two-thirds (62%) said that their professors never encourage discussions of spiritual or religious matters.⁸²

The third chapter in this section of the book presents a study of congregations across the U.S. with significant populations of young adults. Such young adults

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 97

are “exceptions to the norm,” that is, they are actively participating in congregational life. In the latter study, researchers found that the young adults “are wary of their congregation as an *institution*, but are attracted to it as a *community*.”⁸³ Yet, despite their active participation, many of the young adults interviewed reported that they “do not feel integral to congregational life.”⁸⁴

The reports of this research mirrored many of the things reported by Carol Lytch. Choice was paramount: the young adults “chose how much of the official teachings to accept and how much ritual observance to practice.”⁸⁵ Also related to the issue of “choice,” the researchers found that an important factor in attracting young adults to a congregation was having multiple points of entry that “create numerous arenas for young congregants to reflect upon and articulate their own religious identities.”⁸⁶

A point of connection between this research and the work of Kenda Creasy Dean was the finding that “young adults welcome opportunities to feel emotionally affected. Passion *does* matter.

As is the case in *all* of the research reviewed, “the success of interpersonal connections played a very strong role in young adults’ desire to affiliate as members of a congregation.”⁸⁷ Not surprisingly, congregational leaders who are accessible and engaging are especially attractive to young adults. Relationships are key.

The next groupings of chapters present reports from congregations and organizations that have been successful at passing on the faith to Jews, Muslims and Christians. Many of the insights of these chapters reinforce what earlier researchers in this essay have said. Putting prayer at the center of the community and operating with the mission statement “To Inspire and To Require” is what makes the synagogue B’nai Jeshurun attractive to young adults.

In commenting on these chapters, Jack Miles makes several pointed comments about how successful congregations interact with the marketization of religion. Referring to Peter Phan’s chapter on Catholicism, he notes that “the challenge ... for traditional religion lies in devising ways, different in every case, to turn the personal crisis of an individual young man or woman experiencing dehumanization in the American marketplace into a ‘teaching moment’ for the rediscovery of religion as an alternate conception of self and society to the one the market imposes.”⁸⁸ (Think of Turpin’s view of conversion!)

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

Miles also suggests that young people are attracted to the religious community of Taizé to escape the relentless press of consumer capitalism: “The monks of Taizé intend to practice the sanctified life that they have chosen whether or not any young pilgrim shows up to take part in it or not. It is thus for the paradoxical reason that the young, though warmly welcomed, are not catered to at Taizé and are not its *raison d’être* that mediates for them a brief, blessed escape from the commercialization that elsewhere feels so inescapable.”⁸⁹

And this, final, ironic comment: “The taproot of the similarity between Taizé and Congregation B’nai Jeshurun is that “each proceeds by testimony touched with mystery rather than by argumentation, much less by seductive salesmanship. Their market success arises from their refusal to engage in marketing.”⁹⁰

There is hope in these observations that some religious communities are successfully countering the commodification of youth and young adults, presenting alternative visions that grow out of passion and service to God.

For the Muslim communities surveyed, the issues are somewhat different. Two organizations that attract young adults “are programs born out of needs to synthesize American and Muslim ideals and to resolve cultural conflicts residing within individuals.”⁹¹ They have as their goal helping Muslims “think intelligently about issues and question their sources of information.”⁹² They seek to encourage diversity of thought. They are seeking to address issues for second-generation Muslim Americans. Yet issues such as needing a sense of belonging, seeking to be heard and have one’s views valued, and wanting authenticity in religious living run across the different religions’ lines.

Again, Jack Miles comments:

As for that hunger or thirst for authenticity, let me suggest that it arises as the cry of the oppressed from the maw of the same commodification in which our young people [Christian, Jew and Muslim] find themselves. Relentlessly prepped, tested, evaluated, sorted and ranked, they are forced to such a considerable extent to think of themselves as commodities—and to fear that the market may not want what they have on offer—that an escape into another kind of relationship and another way of life, however dimly grasped, surely must have its appeal.⁹³

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 259.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 217.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 263.

He concludes that religious communities must guard against succumbing to the cultural pressure to commodify themselves. He celebrates the paradox that the successful congregations/organizations studied seemed to ask more of their participants (rather than trying to sell them something), thus becoming “an oasis in the desert of consumerism.”⁹⁴

In *Finding Faith: The Spiritual Quest of the Post-Boomer Generation*, researchers Richard Flory and Donald Miller seek to make sense of the religious landscape of the post-Boomer generation. They discuss the significant influences that have shaped the Post-Boomer generation. First, Post-Boomers question institutional authority and emphasize pursuing their personal journeys without benefit of an institutional affiliation.⁹⁵ This suspicion grows out of their perception of the “failure and hypocrisy of corporate, political and religious institutions to act ethically and in more than the most crass self-interest as they have pursued their own ends, often at the expense of their own employees and the public.”⁹⁶

Second, Post-Boomers have grown up in the “global village,” exposed to multiple worldviews through media, schools, and in their own neighborhoods. Because they understand the social construction of belief and value systems, “there seem to no longer be any universal truths, so that what is true for one person may not be true for another.”⁹⁷ Thus tolerance and acceptance are an important value for them.⁹⁸

Flory and Miller develop a typology of how different religious groups “interact with, understand, and frame the relationship between their larger culture and their religious beliefs.”⁹⁹ The authors chose to develop this new typology because they found that typologies of religious action in the world such as Weber’s or H. Richard Niebuhr’s were not sufficient to account for the way that “Post-Boomers express their religious commitments. This is because those commitments are both, in Weber’s categories, world-rejecting and world affirming, and in Niebuhr’s categories, they both resist and accommodate elements within the larger culture.”¹⁰⁰

Through a variety of methods, from digital sampling of internet presence (following links on websites and blogs to groups they were referencing), to ten site visits in different urban areas throughout the United States, and one hundred interviews, four “types” emerged.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Richard Flory and Donald Miller. *Finding Faith: The Spiritual Quest of the Post-Boomer Generation*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), p. 8

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 10.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 8.

⁹⁹ Ibid. p. 4.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 13.

The first type they call *Innovators*, those who embrace the ‘emerging’ postmodern culture, “and within that context are engaging in a spiritual quest that by definition is one that must change and adapt — innovate — to meet the changing cultural currents.”¹⁰¹ However, Innovators tend to resist the values of the consumer culture, valuing instead their ability to shape their lives through the religious choices they make.

Innovators embrace the body as a locus for an active, experiential spiritual life. They are committed to smaller, more intimate religious communities rather than seeking to grow and develop into larger institutional structures. And, finally, they seek to serve the larger communities in which they are located.

The second religious type are *Appropriators*, who, “whether within the mega churches or in their own ministry organizations, exhibit an almost uncanny ability to read the larger culture, determine what is most appealing to young people, and then create a new product that successfully appeals to the younger generation of Christians.”¹⁰²

Appropriators wholeheartedly embrace the marketization and commodification of religion and use it without apology to further their cause to win people to Christ.

People attend Appropriator churches and events because they know what to expect: a good time, professional-quality entertainment, and that they will feel good about being around and with other Christians...this requires Appropriators to continually adjust their ‘product’ to the demands of the market, thus reducing the religious demands that can be required of their clientele.¹⁰³

A third type Flory and Miller identify are *Resisters*, who believe that “American culture has embraced naturalism, scientific and otherwise, which has led to the irrational cultural mindset of postmodernism, leading to relativism, cultural chaos, and an anything goes morality.”¹⁰⁴

For Resisters, the only way out of this is to ‘reclaim’ the culture for Christianity and Christian values and the Christian ‘worldview,’ a broadly defined perspective that is centered on a personal moral system that upholds chastity, fidelity, heterosexuality, and the bio-nuclear family values that argue against homosexuality and abortion, and which promotes the ‘proper’ forms of authority, both secular and religious.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 82.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 83

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 111.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., pp. 111-112.

The fourth type are called *Reclaimers*, those who turn to “ancient Christian traditions in small, family-oriented congregations through which they pursue their desire for spiritual development.”¹⁰⁶ The authors note that Reclaimers seem to have “a desire for patriarchal authority that correlates with their desire for strong, set boundaries-between true and false, right and wrong, and men and women.”¹⁰⁷ They are particularly drawn to the mystery, embodiment, and physical and experiential dimensions of the liturgical traditions...¹⁰⁸

Flory and Miller suggest that “the dominant characteristic across our types — Resisters notwithstanding — is a desire for a theologically grounded belief that makes sense cognitively combined with nonrational expressive tendencies — they want a faith that makes cognitive sense to them and that is *also* an expressive, embodied spiritual experience.”¹⁰⁹

They note that Post-Boomers have not “removed themselves from the individualism that pervades American society,” rather, “their individual spiritual quest is mediated through the communities in which they are active and in which they seek membership and belonging.”¹¹⁰ The authors conclude, “We believe we are witnessing the emergence of a new form of spirituality, what we are calling “Expressive Communalism,” that, although related to the individualistic forms of spirituality, is also distinct from them.”¹¹¹

In light of this, the authors make two suggestions for congregations who want to be welcoming to Post-Boomer generation:

First: “Given the emphasis on embodiment, whether embracing and seeking it or resisting it, those churches and ministries that are able to capture the ‘embodied imagination’ of young Christians ... are more likely to be able to ensure for themselves a vibrant future.”¹¹²

And second: “Those churches and ministries that are able to engage post-Boomers at what we have constantly heard framed as the ‘organic’ level, that is, where the emphasis is on a participatory approach to church and ministry from the grass roots, or from the members upward into the group, whether that is through small churches or small groups, rather than a top-down program development model, will be more successful in the long run.”¹¹³

These recommendations show the authors’ bias toward the innovator approach (which best fits “expressive communalism”). Flory and Miller are critical of the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 152.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 154.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 187.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 188.

¹¹¹ Ibid, p. 188-189.

¹¹² Ibid., pp. 189-190.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 190.

Appropriator model because of its reliance on market-driven methods that “reduce the demands that can be required of their clientele.”¹¹⁴ In this, they share the concerns of Smith and Denton and Dean that “theology lite” may be entertaining, but it may not fully resemble the gospel of Jesus.

They are also highly critical of the Resisters, whom they characterize as “defensive, authoritarian, aggressive and often condescending.”¹¹⁵ “In the end, the rationalist Christian worldview is one of extreme individualism, traditional authority, and a conservative political ideology that is glossed with claims to Christian values.”¹¹⁶

Clearly, the authors do not see this particular type of religion as adequate to deal with the complexities of the post-modern world in which we live.

The book, *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World*, reports on the results of a research project designed and carried out by a team of four scholars and educators who “hold in common a deep respect for the potential at stake in the development of each individual and particularly for the ways in which attention to human development may enhance the will and capacity of people to work and live well together and to face tough, even unprecedented challenges.”¹¹⁷

The authors explain their motivation for pursuing the project:

“as the world becomes more complex, society more diverse, and former certainties more ambiguous, even those who are well educated and trained may become overwhelmed, discouraged, sometimes frightened. We recognize with respect the temptation to make things more manageable by retreating into professional expertise, the politics of control, cynical interpretations, single-issue politics, sound-bite discourse, or numbing entertainment.”¹¹⁸

These authors name the daunting issues which people face in current U.S. culture: individualism, busyness and consumerism, cynicism, and tribalism. Each of these four reinforce the others. For example,

“A market culture rooted in an ideology of individualism creates a demanding workplace where some work ever harder to purchase things they do not need, while others, working equally hard, cannot secure the basics of food, shelter, and health care. Busyness and consumerism, and

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 83.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 117.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 116.

¹¹⁷ Laurent Daloz, Cheryl Keen, James Keen and Sharon Parks. *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), pp. 4-5.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

their accompanying anxiety can easily become substitutes for meaning and clarity of purpose, numbing our capacity to act responsively.”¹¹⁹

The results of living in a market culture rooted in an ideology of individualism, not only numbs us, but can lead to cynicism:

When children learn early to be suspicious of the market manipulation that pervades their lives, when adolescents discover that conventional cynicism passes for sophistication, and when young adults are led to presume that all politicians, professors, managers, and other authorities are committed primarily to expedient self-interest, opportunities for initiation into meaningful aspirations shrivel.¹²⁰

Individualism and cynicism harden into tribalism, where “one does not attempt to consider the interdependent good of society as a whole, how the actions of one sector will affect another, and what is at stake when certain alliances are in place and others are neglected.”¹²¹

The authors designed a study in which they conducted interviews over a period of years with more than a hundred people “who had sustained long-term commitments to work on behalf of the common good, even in the face of global complexity, diversity, and ambiguity.”¹²² They sought to answer four questions: (1) What are such people like? (2) How do they become that way? (3) What keeps them going in spite of inevitable discouragement? and (4) What can be done to encourage this kind of citizenship to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century?¹²³

The subjects of the interviews were persons chosen for: their commitment to the common good, their perseverance and resilience, the ethical congruence between their life and work, and their engagement with diversity and complexity.¹²⁴ The stories that emerge from the interviews the team conducted are both inspiring and illuminating.

The researchers found a mix of ingredients, a ‘constellation of interdependent patterns’ that lead to a person living a life of commitment to the common good. These included: community (growing up in hospitable spaces that foster trustworthy belonging), compassion (ability to feel with those who are ‘other’), conviction (cultivating ‘habits of mind’ like interpersonal perspective taking and dialectical thought), courage (imagining ourselves, and actually going, beyond our comfort zones), confession (reckoning with the cost of commitment and the

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 12.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 13.

¹²² Ibid., p. 5.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid., pp. 5-6.

role of taboo motivations like anger, jealousy, the need to please) and commitment (the paradoxical nature of being committed to a certain place yet at home in many places).

Most interesting is the way that mentoring appeared as a key factor in shaping people to live lives of commitment to the common good. The structure of the book, in which the story of one person leads to the story of another whom s/he mentored, is both fascinating and convincing about the importance of a mentor’s influence in shaping another’s life.

While *Common Fire* focuses particularly on young adults and the roles mentors and life experiences play in shaping a person’s sense of vocation in contributing to the common good, Dori Baker and Joyce Mercer’s *Lives to Offer: Accompanying Youth on Their Vocational Quests*, views youth ministry “as a companioned walk in which young people together with adults seek ways to offer their lives to an anxious, hurting world.”¹²⁵ They share with *Common Fire* a concern to help young people find “lives of meaning.”¹²⁶

Their diagnosis of the obstacles that face young people seeking to discern vocation includes the ubiquitous presence of voices of consumerism, materialism, violence, and militarism in U.S. culture:

Voices within popular culture tell girls they should aspire to be sexy and thin, as well as ‘smart, strong and bold.’ The video game industry markets a world in which boys are rewarded for quick, finger-activated response to perceived threat. During nationally televised sporting events, slick commercials romanticize military service. Olympic replays disproportionately highlight bikini-clad volleyball players. Schools driven by standardized learning cut funding to the arts, while funneling resources toward creating better test-takers. Both boys and girls watch reality shows that glorify aggression, sexual commodification, and material gain. Persistent messages over the airwaves tell boys how to become certain kinds of men and girls how to become certain kinds of women. The voices create a pervasive and persuasive curriculum of vocation that goes largely unchallenged.¹²⁷

Like many of the studies we have looked at, these authors are challenging the commodification that consumer culture in the United States thrusts on young people. Their question, and the question they hope young people will ask is,

¹²⁵ Dori Grinko Baker and Joyce Ann Mercer. *Lives to Offer: Accompanying Youth on Their Vocational Quests*, (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007), p. 174.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

“What does our faith teach us about how to live the Good Life?”¹²⁸ Like the authors of *Common Fire*, they are hoping for an alternative vision of the Common Good from which will emerge “prophets, sages, healers and activists who will sense an urgent call, find a community of support, and respond with lives to offer.”¹²⁹

They believe that communities of faith are “deep wells from which such lives may spring.” They are deep wells because faith traditions offer resources that counter commodification, resources such as (1) the notion of *vocation*, (2) the companionship of *community*, (3) a commitment to freedom to live beyond gender stereotypes, (4) an understanding of the teen years as “vital and filled with present value, rather than a holding pattern while awaiting ‘real life’ as an adult,” and (5) the doctrine of grace that allows “wide margins of error in which to try on various roles, make mistakes, learn from failures, and still be loved.”¹³⁰

Utilizing stories of teens whom they have met through their participation in Candler’s Youth Theology Initiative, who have been former parishioners, have been at national gatherings of youth, or who have been identified through media reports of innovative youth outreach, the authors mine these accounts to help readers glean insights into how to be better companions on young people’s way to meaningful vocation. Focusing particularly on ecological and gender issues, they offer concrete practices and suggestions for helping adults to sojourn with youth as they offer their lives in response to God’s call.

Particularly helpful is the way they question the conflation of “work” with “vocation.” One of the key insights they offer is that “associating vocation with adult labor means, for the most part, *disassociating* youth from vocation.”¹³¹ This means that “far too often, instead of inviting youth into the companioned walk we call vocation, youth ministry has sent them on a vacation—an extended trip with the primary goals of keeping youth occupied, entertained, and distracted...”¹³²

Youth have a vocation to offer churches by offering their prophetic visions and gifts in the present. But, say these authors, “In a culture that persuasively presents ‘good consumer’ as a primary vocation of youth, it is all too easy for the church to simply invite young people to become good consumers of church, instead of inviting them to live out their calling [as dreamers and prophets and servers and leaders in the world].”¹³³

In conclusion, a journey through these Lilly Endowment-funded resources can strengthen the sojourner to resist the power of consumer capitalism as a defining

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 4.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 160.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 172.

“Anabel C. Proffitt on Countering Commodification”

from the website

Resources for American Christianity

<http://www.resourcingchristianity.org/>

force in our lives. These varied studies and writings offer a plethora of voices and perspectives on a daunting problem. They provide multiple points of entry into exploring how the church’s faith traditions interact with current market forces and how we can combat the commodification of youth (and adults) through listening to the voices of young people, acknowledging our own complicity in allowing consumer culture to define our sense of the world, and finding ways to walk as companions with youth and young adults in communities of faith that support our mutual need for conversion to a life of self-giving rather than consumptive excess.