

The 1996 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture "Christ and the Adolescent: A Theological Approach to Youth Ministry"

Introduction

I am honored to introduce the first volume of the Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture, presented in Daytona Beach, FL, and Princeton, NJ, in the spring of 1996 by James W. Fowler, Robin Maas, and Robert Wuthnow. The Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture are designed to foster original research on youth and the church. As part of a new venture in ministry sponsored by Princeton Theological Seminary, the Institute for Youth Ministry they describe a shift occurring in the churches thinking about youth and ministry. Instead of ghettoizing youth into clubs apart from the congregation, the church's mission with youth views young people as integral to the total mission of the church, and youth ministry as a theological task which is not only about youth ministry, but about youth's ministry as well.

The 1996 lectures, titled "Christ and the Adolescent: A Theological Approach to Youth Ministry," address mainline churches who have suffered grievous losses in their attempts to address teens. These losses come at a time when public institutions are calling attention to the important role churches play in adolescent development. Churches agree: We believe we have something to contribute to youth in the person of Jesus Christ-and therefore Jesus Christ, not age-level education, pastoral counseling, or recreational programs, must be the starting point for youth ministry.

We asked each of our lecturers to approach this theme from the perspective of their own disciplines. James Fowler posits a new shape for youth ministry that recognizes nuances of human development; Robin Maas uses biblical exegesis to redefine the spiritual journey of youth and the adults who mentor them; and Robert Wuthnow analyzes the sociological significance of service learning trends for the church's ministry with teenagers. Together they point to a new direction for ministry with young people.

We approach this direction humbly and with hope. We know that the church's renewal depends not on the church of tomorrow, but the church of today-a church in which youth can be integral missionaries to their elders and world. May this volume challenge and nourish the ministry God has laid before you.

Godspeed,

Kenda Creasy Dean
Director, Institute for Youth Ministry

1996 Lectures

Robin Maas

“Christ and the Adolescent: Piper or Prophet?”

“Christ and the Adolescent: A Decision for Love”

“Christ and the Adolescent: Written in Stone”

James W. Fowler

“Perspectives on Adolescents, Personhood, and Faith”

“Adolescence in the Trinitarian Praxis of God”

“Grace, Repentance, and Commitment: Youth Initiation in Care and Formation”

Robert Wuthnow

“Youth and Culture in American Society: The Social Context of Ministry to Teenagers”

“Religious Upbringing: Does It Matter and, If So, What Matters?”

“Unto the Least of These: Youth and the Ministry of Caring”

YOUTH AND CULTURE IN AMERICAN SOCIETY: THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF MINISTRY TO TEENAGERS

Robert Wuthnow



My task is to provide some sense of the connections between young people and the culture in which we live that may be of value as we think together about the challenge of youth min-

istries in today's world. I do this as a sociologist, as a social observer, not as someone with skills in ministry, so we must think of this as a collective endeavor. I want to set forth some issues that I think are worthy of consideration, but it will be necessary to consider them interactively. I have divided the task into three parts: the social conditions that now pose the greatest challenges for young people and for youth ministries; what we know about growing up religious and what it may mean to people as they mature and reflect on their upbringing; and what we know about young people who become involved in caring for the needy through their churches. In short, the first topic is church and society, the second topic is religious socialization, and the third topic is service.

In the first lecture, then, I want to paint with a large brush, suggesting some of the characteristics of our society, some of the characteristics of churches, and some of the characteristics of American young people that we need to have in the backs of our minds as we think about youth ministries.

I want to concentrate on some of the profound changes that



Robert Wuthnow is the Gerhard Andlinger Professor of Social Sciences and director of the Center for the Study of American Religion at Princeton University. His fifteen books include The Restructuring of American Religion, Christianity in the Twenty-first Century, Sharing the Journey, God and Mammon in America, and Learning to Care: Elementary Kindness in an Age of Indifference.

have taken place in our society during the past three or four decades, and in each case say something about the significance of these changes for young people and for churches. I shall focus on seven developments, leaving aside some others for lack of time.

First: Neighborhoods have been replaced by networks. Most Americans now live in bedroom communities. The average American moves every three years. Most neighborhoods are no longer ethnic enclaves. Nor is the church an integral part of the neighborhood. Most people now commute long distances to work, send their children on buses to schools, and live some distance from the church they attend. Most people still have friends, but these friends are people at work or in some other town or state, rather than their neighbors. This means that people have to make more of an effort to get to church. Going on Sunday mornings is a private activity, not a public activity done in the presence and knowledge of your neighbors. Many people go to church seeking community. But many go wanting anonymity: they know these people are just there on Sundays, they never see them during the week, and they know they will move on in a year or two. For young people, it becomes harder to settle in. Your church friends, if you have any, are generally different from your friends at school. You feel like a transient, going from one church to another while you are growing up.

Second: People are working longer hours. Labor statistics show that the typical hourly worker in the United States still receives wages for a work week of approximately forty hours. What these figures mask, however, is the fact that an increasing number of people—who are not paid by the hour—generally work longer. At present, approximately forty percent of all men in the U.S. labor force put in more than forty hours a week at their jobs—and a quarter put in more than fifty hours. Among women, the figures are still somewhat lower, but at least one woman in five works outside the home more than the standard forty hours. These figures are even higher in professional and managerial occupations, and reach the highest levels among married men and women—precisely those whose time is likely to be fullest with other responsibilities, such as childrearing. The most substantial increase in the typical work week has come from more and more women participating in the labor force. When the work week for individual workers is counted, this fact is missed. But for most people, the relevant fact of life is that they and their spouses both work now, whereas a generation ago only one spouse was likely to be employed outside the home. In 1950, for instance, only 37 percent of all women between ages twenty-five and fifty-four were gainfully employed, meaning that the typical household contributed about forty hours a week to the labor market, or if this 37 percent were averaged in, no more than about fifty-five hours. By comparison, 81 percent of all women in this age group are now employed, meaning that the typical household involves dual careers, or at least eighty hours a week on the job. When work from all these various sources is taken into consideration, some estimates suggest that per capita involvement in the labor force

may on average be as much as an extra month per year, compared with only two decades ago.

As a result, large numbers of the American public complain of having too little time to do anything but work. According to one recent survey, 48 percent of the U.S. labor force say they have too little time to spend with their spouses, and 39 percent say they have too little time for their children. Thirty-two percent of those polled felt they had to spend too much time working. In a survey I conducted in 1992, 66 percent of the labor force said the statement "I'm working harder than I did five years ago" described themselves very well or fairly well. One person in two (52 percent) said the same about the statement "I wish I could work fewer hours than I do."

Now, from the church's point of view, all this hard work may be a good thing. Only a few decades ago, church leaders were lamenting the decline of the Protestant work ethic, worrying about too much leisure turning Americans soft and irresponsible. But, from a different perspective, all this hard work has worrisome consequences both for the church and for the lives of American youth. For the church, it is simply harder to get people out to do volunteer work, and this may especially be a problem for women, who did the lion's share of church work in the past, and who are too overburdened by their jobs to do as much of it. For young people, the results are likely to range from not having parents to help with the youth group at church, to the problems of latchkey children staying home unattended and getting into trouble, to picking up signals from their role models that it is better to get a part-time job after school in order to buy new clothes and CDs than to spend time doing volunteer work at the church.

Third: The nuclear family is proving to be persistent but precarious. We're all familiar with predictions about the collapse of the nuclear family. Some writers have gone so far as to suggest that the nuclear family was an aberration, destined to fail and to be replaced by something else. The nuclear family has, in fact, remained fairly strong. But it is not as strong as it once was. In the 1950s, enormous weight was placed on marriage, child-rearing, and homes. During the next two decades, things changed dramatically. For instance, the number of unmarried couples living together rose to 523,000 in 1970, and then climbed to 1.3 million by 1979. Between 1960 and 1979, the proportion of all white families who lived together as married units declined from 76 percent to 64 percent, while households headed by single males rose from 7 percent to 12 percent, and by single females from 17 percent to 24 percent. The changes among African American families were even more pronounced, with married families declining from 60 percent to 43 percent of the total, single male families rising from 11 percent to 15 percent, and single female-headed households increasing from 29 percent to 41 percent of the total. Divorced people who did not remarry edged up from 1.9 percent of all households in 1950 to 2.3 percent in 1960, and then rose to 5.8 percent by 1979. And after the 1950s, birth rates declined steadily, from 118 per thousand women in 1960, to 88 in 1970, and then to 66 in

1976. This meant, of course, that fewer families were centered around child-rearing. Whereas a third had young children in 1960, for instance, fewer than one fifth did by 1980.

At present, there is much talk about the social ill effects of divorce, of single-parent families, and of absentee fathers. Those problems, of course, directly influence American young people. My colleague Sara McLanahan has shown in her book *Growing Up with a Single Parent* that children who grow up in single-parent families have a far greater chance than other children of dropping out of high school, not being able to afford to go to college, and having marital problems of their own. These children, and their mothers, may be especially in need of support from their churches. But there is a broader implication as well. American churches have always drawn close connections between God and the home, probably to the good, insofar as this connection reinforces the value of families. Yet, we are no longer as confident of this imagery as we once were. God as our daddy may be a comforting but quaint idea in a world where fathers are increasingly absent. And for the millions of American children who are abused every year—every day—by their parents, it may be very hard to imagine that God is a loving father, rather than an abusive one.

Fourth: Churches are in serious financial difficulty. You might not think this, driving past some of the fine churches one sees in the suburbs. But consider some of the headlines that have appeared in national newspapers in the last few years:

“Churches Caught in Economy’s Grip”

“Expenses Force Cuts in Programs”

“Church Finances in Crisis”

“Bad Tidings for the Church”

“Church Faces Empty Treasury”

“Recession Catches up to Ministries”

“Church Schools to Be Shut”

“Red Ink at Youth for Christ”

“Debts Pose Problems for Missions”

“Financial Worries Darken Church Assembly”

And statistics show clearly that giving to churches, as a proportion of family incomes, has declined steadily over the past thirty years. One of the projects I am working on at the moment is a study of how these declines have been affecting sixty local congregations, Protestant and Catholic, in various parts of the country. We’ve looked at everything from struggling storefront churches in inner cities, to sedate parishes in the suburbs, to relatively new megachurches with sprawling campuses of buildings. And there’s one thing that all these churches have in common: They’re in bad financial shape. They’re all having to cut programs. They’re all postponing or scaling back building programs and renovation projects. And they’re all frustrated in trying to meet needs in their communities.

The impact on youth ministries is often severe. When staff cuts are

made, one of the first to go is the youth pastor. Or it's the Christian education director. Or budgets are sliced for Sunday school materials, or training programs, or to pay for buses to haul in children, or to subsidize youth trips and summer camps. And the long-term prospect is not bright. The reason church finances are declining is that the clergy are doing an absolutely dismal job of drawing connections between faith and the work lives and money concerns that occupy most of us on a daily basis. Instead of trying to minister to the full range of these concerns, they run a pledge drive once a year. They're afraid to talk about money for fear of offending someone, and they convey the message that God's work is being done by them in the church, rather than by the rest of us in our jobs. When that happens, most of us give a token amount, if we happen to feel like it. And we are doing little to teach stewardship, or tithing, or charitable giving to our children.

Fifth: Organized religion no longer holds a monopoly on spirituality. What I mean is that there are many other ways to express one's spirituality, or to get ideas about spirituality, than by going to church. But let me put this observation in historical perspective. In one sense, organized religion had a monopoly on spirituality in America from virtually the beginning: most of the colonies were theocracies, and people who ran afoul of the clergy were in serious trouble. In another sense, however, the religious monopoly was not always there. We know, for example, that as few as 15 to 20 percent of the colonists were actually church members, and that the clergy despaired of finding ways to curb the behavior of sailors, trappers, prostitutes, and virtually everyone else who was not a white male property owner. We also know that as recently as the middle of the nineteenth century, only about half the population was churched, and that spirituality, as historian Jon Butler and others have shown, took a wide variety of forms, including spiritualism, witchcraft, astrology, divination, and magic. In fact, the churches waged a persistent war against these alternative spiritualities. And they did so with considerable success. For instance, between 1870 and 1914, the number of local churches grew from 70,000 to 225,000, and the number of church buildings grew from 63,000 to 203,000. So did the population, of course, but more people were attending church by the end of World War I than ever before. And this trend continued for the next four decades. Thus, one could accurately say that the great era of church monopoly was the 1950s, more so than at any previous time. Compared with the nineteenth century, when fewer than half the population claimed membership in a local congregation, studies in the 1950s showed that at least three-quarters of Americans belonged to a local house of worship. One study, conducted in 1956, put the figure at 80 percent.

But all that started changing in the 1960s, and it has continued to change. Average weekly church attendance, if polls are believed, has dropped off a little, especially between 1958 and 1971, but otherwise has remained fairly stable. Church membership has followed a similar pattern. At present, as many as 60 percent of the population claim membership in a

church, and as many as 30 percent claim to attend services every week. So the breakup of a religious monopoly is not evident in declining participation, as much as it is in the wider ways in which people are able to find spiritual inspiration. For instance: in one twelve-month period a year or two ago, it was estimated that approximately five million people purchased books about angels, none of which were published by churches or written by clergy. About the same time, half the books on the *New York Times* non-fiction bestseller list were about spirituality: *Embraced by the Light*, *The Road Less Traveled*, *Care of the Soul*, *Homecoming*, and so on. Now, authors like Thomas Moore and John Bradshaw certainly have religious training, but their writing lies largely outside the established churches. And popular books are only one example. Add spiritual retreat centers, holistic health organizations, self-help groups, Alcoholics Anonymous, cable television, psychic boutiques, and it is clear that we live in a very pluralistic religious marketplace.

Young people may have little interest in all this; much of it, after all, is for middle-aged baby boomers going through a midlife crisis. But young people also live in a spiritual marketplace. They see their parents searching all over the map. They know more about the Bible from movies than they do from attending church. They take "spiritual inventory" tests in *Seventeen* magazine. And they dabble at ouija boards and crystals and pyramids.

Sixth: We live increasingly in a multicultural society. We all know this, but let me give you some figures. In 1950, 89 percent of the population was white, 10 percent was black, the remaining 1 percent was mostly Asian, and the Hispanic population was not counted separately from the white Anglo population. By 1990, the white population had decreased from 89 percent to 80 percent; the black population had risen from 10 percent to 12 percent; the Asian American population had risen from less than 1 percent to 3 percent; other races now made up 4 percent of the population; and the Hispanic population, when considered separately, was 9 percent. Another way to grasp the changes taking place is to compare the growth rates of various groups between 1980 and 1990. During that decade, the white population grew by a mere 6 percent; the black population by 13 percent; the Hispanic population by 53 percent; and the Asian American population by 108 percent. What does that suggest? It suggests that about one-quarter of the U.S. population is *not* white Anglo—and that proportion is getting larger all the time. And in many places, the diversity is much greater. Take Los Angeles, for example: 33 percent of its population is Hispanic, 9 percent is Asian, and 8 percent is African American. Or take New York: 18 percent African American, 15 percent Hispanic, and 5 percent Asian American. Furthermore, there is much religious diversity: 3 million Jews, anywhere from 500,000 to 5 million Muslims, 400,000 Buddhists, and as many as 13 million people with no religious preference. But multiculturalism is about values, even more than it is about demographics. Multiculturalism means taking other people's values seriously, and it means valuing diversity for its

own sake. It means that European Americans must not consider themselves better than African Americans or Native Americans. It also means that Christians must not consider themselves any closer to God than Muslims, or Buddhists, or Hindus. In short, multiculturalism has enormous theological implications.

As yet, we can only speculate about its implications for American youth. But one possibility is that young people are already multicultural at one level of thinking: they are likely to regard Christianity as just one of many ways to establish a relationship with God; it ceases to be THE TRUTH and becomes a lifestyle, a circumstance of birth and nationality. Another implication is that Christianity is fine, but eclecticism is better. That is, learn quickly what else there is to know—all the gems buried in other religions, all the things they didn't tell you at church. Still another implication is that church increasingly becomes an enclave over against a more heterogeneous world. Young people go to church because that is the best place to associate with other Korean Americans, or with other white middle-class Anglos. Most churches are quite homogeneous; in comparison, the schools are not. And there is value in being able to associate with people like oneself. But young people will also realize at some point that the church has become out of step with the wider world. They will look back on the church of their youth, and they will be embarrassed by its parochialism.

And seventh: The sexual revolution has come and gone—almost. When I interview people who came of age during the 1950s or before, one of the dominant themes in their religious upbringing was the taboo on premarital sex, at least avoiding becoming pregnant or getting someone pregnant. In 1962, the birth-control pill changed all that. Within a few years, approval of premarital sex rose from only a handful of the population to a majority, often with the church's implicit blessing. That is, official doctrine remained firmly against sexual experimentation, but youth leaders and popular writers increasingly found ways to give tacit assent. Young people who at one time had read purloined copies of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* were now able to read between the lines in Harvey Cox's *Secular City* to find out that even the Virgin Mary probably wasn't really a virgin. Some studies, of course, found that premarital and extramarital sex were more widely practiced than anyone had ever imagined. And other research showed that sexual liberation was a prominent factor in young people leaving the churches during the 1960s and 1970s.

Today, words like sexual liberation or book titles such as *The Joy of Sex* seem strangely out of date. In an era of AIDS, what was once joyful has now become courting with death. So much so, in fact, that a common response is to bury one's head and not talk about it at all. Several privately conducted surveys of sexual activity on college campuses that I've seen show startling rates of unsafe sexual activity. In other contexts, the fear associated with sex has rendered speech almost impossible. One of my graduate students, for example, is doing field work at a volunteer organiza-

tion in New York City that delivers meals for people who are dying of AIDS; many of the volunteers are HIV positive. They and those who are not HIV positive talk obliquely about being careful, but it is impossible for them to be more direct.

Young people are faced with enormous questions of life and death whenever they think about sex. A young woman we interviewed for a research project in South Carolina went to a large middle-class high school, and eight of her classmates had already died of AIDS. She was doing what she could to counsel others and to encourage the school to have an AIDS awareness rally. Churches, of course, have been torn apart at the denominational level in recent years trying to formulate position papers on sexuality. In the meantime, sexuality is an issue that no youth ministry can safely avoid.

If time permitted, it would be helpful to discuss some other social developments in detail, and even mentioning them briefly may be useful. For instance, the gender revolution is still working itself out. This means that young people are growing up with mothers and fathers for whom gender roles have changed and are perhaps still ambiguous; it means that young women may have more exposure to female leadership in the clergy than ever before; it means that theological questions about gender are still being debated in many churches; and it means that inclusive language and gender relationships may be especially important in some youth groups. Another important development is that higher education is now experienced by more and more Americans, but with mixed consequences. Generation X is faced with enormous pressures to attain higher education, but it is unclear what to major in, whether to obtain broad exposure to the liberal arts or to try to prepare for a career, and how best to anticipate a changing job market. More and more young people are coming back to live with their parents after college, and more and more young people are changing their minds about careers, or working at temporary jobs because something permanent is unavailable. The emotional pressures are enormous, especially because parents spend the family fortune educating their children, because society tells us that work should always be personally meaningful, and yet employers are often in need of routine work that is boring, low paying, and devoid of long-term amenities. Along with higher education, I should also mention the impact of the information revolution. Television, video and CD technology, computers, and of course the internet all make growing up in America today different than it was for most previous generations. The main implication of these new technologies for religion is that young people have many other ways of obtaining ideas about spirituality than from the churches. There are dangers, of course, from virtual reality violence, addictions to computer games, pornography on the internet, and so forth, but probably the greatest challenge is just dealing with the overload of information itself. People need to be informed, and yet we all must make hard choices about what to understand and what to simply ignore.

Finally, I should mention the growing number of people who are seeking community in small, intentional groups. My research on small groups among adults showed that about 40 percent of the public are currently involved in some kind of small group that meets on a regular basis and that provides caring and support for its members. About 60 percent of these people are involved in a small group that is sponsored by a church, such as a Bible study, Sunday school class, or prayer fellowship. Small groups were of course pioneered by youth leaders, going back to the early part of the twentieth century when the YMCA started popularizing them, and then including the church youth groups and campus parachurch groups of the 1950s and 1960s. These may be especially promising for young people of the next generation, but they will take planning and leadership by the churches. One of the weaknesses of many groups is that they are quite homogeneous, failing to expose their members to people of other races or ethnic groups or to other religions or social backgrounds. Another weakness is that many of these groups promote a quick-fix, do-it-yourself style of spirituality that is theologically shallow and historically ignorant. Young people's groups may do well to attract members at all, and they may be accomplishing a lot by giving first-hand exposure to basic biblical knowledge. But the hope would be that some groups could encourage spiritual discipline and accountability as well.

Where, then, does that leave us? With neighborhoods no longer as tight-knit as they once were, with jobs more demanding and uncertain, with families precarious, with sex a matter of life and death, with the society becoming more racially and ethnically diverse, and with churches in bad financial shape and having lost their monopoly over spirituality, the picture may seem gloomy indeed. Some leaders are convinced that the sky is falling. A reasoned assessment would indicate that the challenges facing young people today are certainly immense. Churches can provide safe havens in the storm, a protective enclave just a little larger than the family in which like-minded people can feel secure, make friends, date one another, and affirm that God is in their midst. There is value in doing that, especially during the tempestuous years of early adolescence.

But adolescence is also a time of breaking away and of seeking an independent sense of self-identity. In a world as uncertain as the one in which we live, we cannot encourage young people to live entirely within a sheltered enclave, but we cannot tell them simply to go out and find themselves without any guidance, either. We need to provide deliberate instruction in the traditions of the church, and to offer skills in negotiating the wider world. In the next lecture, I'll talk about some of what we are learning from doing research on people who have grown up religious, asking what has worked and what has meant the most to them. ●