

The Juvenilization of American Christianity

By Thomas E. Bergler

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In early January 2013, sixty thousand young people ages 18–25 attended “Passion,” a four-day conference in Atlanta, GA full of concerts, speakers, and local charity drives. At the same time, mainline denominations, African American churches, and Catholic churches are all suffering diminishing attendance, while evangelical and conservative Protestant churches are remaining steady yet, according to Bergler, immature in their faith. The contrast between events like “Passion” and the concurrent sense of diminishing denominational and religious affiliation are precisely the sort of dichotomies that Thomas E. Bergler’s *The Juvenilization of American Christianity* seeks to explain. He argues that both trends have been shaped by and determined by the cultural attention to youth and adolescence. Bergler argues this point through his careful historical analysis of the development of American Christianity in the Catholic, evangelical Protestant, liberal Protestant, and African American traditions from World War II through the 1960s.

According to Bergler, juvenilization is “the process by which the religious beliefs, practices, and developmental characteristics of adolescents become accepted as appropriate for Christians of all ages” (4). Bergler situates adolescence in its developmental, economic, and cultural contributions to American life. Developmentally, adolescents emphasize emotional experience that is expressed through heightened sensory input. Socially, they tend to be highly influenced by peer relationships (as opposed to being loyal to parental values). Religiously, they are developmentally concerned with identity, personal transformation, and self-exploration. Economically and socially, teenagers are in highly regulated education systems, tend to have very limited opportunities for employment, and are a vital market for the entertainment industries. Finally, adolescence, Bergler argues, functions as a “screen” for adults to “project their worst fears and highest hopes” (16). As

young people, adults often see youth as predictors of a society's ills and promises. An increased high school dropout rate becomes cause for alarm over the "future" of American society, while their display of volunteerism indicates a sunny outcome in the coming decades. The designation of teenagers as both potentially deviant and also "naturally" hopeful are two contradicting dimensions of teenage life that contribute to a confusion about young people and their worth. Bergler argues that in fact our attempt to protect young people from the larger society has created a situation in which young people are neither prepared for nor interested in entering adulthood.

This inability and disinterest in entering adulthood has affected church culture in that the expectations for church life have become juvenilized. The most worrisome dimension of this for Bergler? The cost of spiritual maturity for believers. For him, the very future of the Church is at stake, and no one American religious tradition is left devoid of this contagious juvenilizing trend.

For Bergler, the story of the emphasis and even glorification of youth culture begins in the late 1930s and 1940s. He argues that in light of the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War, America was concerned about a "crisis of civilization." American values like freedom, individualism, and democracy were under threat by communism, and the future of the nation was at stake. The institution of the high school was the first effort to keep unemployed young people off the streets and away from the temptations of communism. Alongside these major educational shifts, national associations for youth began to emerge as public influencers. Organizations like the American Youth Commission (AYC), established in 1939, and the National Youth Administration (NYA), which grew out of the AYC, emerged as national governmental efforts to organize youth in the wake of massive unemployment and fear around communism. Church leaders ranging from the Catholic educator George Johnson, African American Christian educator Mary McLeod Bethune, fundamentalist leaders like Jack Wyrzten were all involved in these organizations and their public programs. President Truman praised the burgeoning Youth for Christ movement "as just what America needed" (25). Religion itself gained new respect as one of the main social institutions that kept young people from getting into trouble and formed them into good citizens through the creation of strong youth programming in churches.

In Chapter 2, "Misreading the Signs of the Times," Bergler outlines four major branches of American Christianity—Evangelical Protestantism, Methodists as representatives for Liberal Protestantism, Catholics, and African American churches. Each branch of Christianity responded to the emergence of youth culture in ways that actually foreshadowed their future growth or decline. The outcomes, according to Bergler, are as follows. The Methodist Church established a Youth Department that was suspicious of a purely emotional conversion experience. Instead, they believed that adolescents were the best social activists because of their "natural idealism" (90). Given this premise, an assumption Bergler argues was misguided, Methodist Youth Departments in the 1940s and early 1950s emphasized social action and prophetic witness as keys to the Christian life. Challenging social institutions, however, soon came back to haunt the denomination itself. Many of these same adolescents, Bergler argues, began to question their own denomination's

politics and conservatism in the late 1950s and 1960s, prompting disaffection from the Church.

Evangelical Protestants responded to youth culture by embracing entertainment mechanisms while simultaneously emphasizing moral strictness. Youth for Christ and Young Life, for example, attracted youth to popular rallies. At the same time, however, bodily purity became an increasingly vital prerequisite for evangelical Protestants. While evangelical Protestants assumed that mainstream means of communication—film, song, radio—were morally “neutral,” it was difficult to see whether Christianity was influencing mainstream culture or mainstream culture had deluded the gospel message. This deluded Christian message alongside concern for bodily purity eventually caused teenagers to want to protect themselves from socially risky or transgressive situations like engaging in inter-racial justice for fear that getting into danger automatically meant risking one’s moral bodily purity. The combination of entertainment and moral strictness, therefore, would hinder evangelical Protestants from taking action on social causes, including racism and the criminally outcast.

While evangelicals failed to engage racial issues for fear of corrupting their children, according to Bergler, African American churches remained largely insulated from the effects of youth culture and instead emphasized the responsibility of youth to the previous generations to uphold and fight for the justice of the African American community. Bergler argues, however, that while African American churches were not as effected by early youth cultural pressures, by the late 1960s they began to see the cohesiveness of their tradition erode partly due to the disillusionment around racial integration and the struggles to “secure economic equality” (182). Many upwardly mobile African Americans began to leave the church over questions of God’s justice.

American Catholics were concerned with the rise of evangelical Protestant organizations like Youth for Christ. They countered with their own national youth organizations, which flourished during the 1950s due to the “ghettoization” of American Catholicism. These organizations tended to emphasize sexual purity, sponsoring dances, sports events, and “youth of the year” contests. According to Bergler, these activities had negative effects on the future health and maturity of American Catholicism. First, a concern for larger social concerns was overshadowed by a focus on pleasurable activities and reinforced self-absorbed adolescent tendencies. Secondly, religious instruction began to erode as an increased emphasis was placed on asking questions rather than giving explanations. By the 1960s and 1970s, Catholic catechetical instruction had weakened. While the 1950s saw a great growth in Catholic social youth culture, in the long run, Bergler argues, such emphasis eroded the future spiritual maturity of American Catholics.

In Bergler’s analysis, no aspect of American Christianity was left unscathed by the effects of juvenilization. For all but the evangelical camp, juvenilization has been a challenge and a struggle. And while evangelicals saw great growth and rising popularity of their “brand” of Christianity, it by no means resulted in a “healthy, mature” version. Bergler does not leave the reader despairing over the love affair that American Christianity had with adolescence, however. He suggests, instead, that Christian leaders—both head pastors and youth pastors—“tame” juvenilization by

teaching biblical understandings of spiritual maturity and by reforming the practices of worship and religious education so that they are more in line with biblical definitions of spiritual maturity. His project, in the end, is a reforming one. He is hoping that his reader is mature enough to take up the challenge he has placed there.

Bergler's careful analysis of the 1950s in particular is impressive with its careful attention to popular trends and primary source material across disparate denominational histories. This is a huge contribution to the study of youth ministry, and I would recommend this book particularly for those training and teaching future youth leaders in the church. At the same time, I am left with two concerns about this master narrative Bergler offers. First, Bergler's analysis largely ends in the 1970s, and I am curious about what has influenced American Christianity since that time. Perhaps, one of the largest cultural shifts since the 1970s is the new wave of immigrants in the United States, particularly that of Latin American immigrants but also African and Korean immigrant communities. I am curious as to what extent the landscape of American Christianity has shifted and how much juvenilization has influenced these particular Christian immigrant communities. Certainly, I did not expect Bergler to address this different historical time period, but I would have liked to see his acknowledgement that the analysis he is offering is a part of a larger story that may be influenced by other trends, including immigrant shifts in the history of American Christianity. My second concern is less historical and more a question of the master narrative he is telling. Bergler's articulation of juvenilization seems dangerously close to a kind of elegy for an early day, a day in which feminists, womanists, and other minority voices were silenced. I am wondering to what extent Bergler's analysis might have parsed out a bit more what was the product of juvenilization and what was a product of an important historical shift in Christian life, particularly in the Liberal Protestant tradition. Must we really mourn the loss of an earlier age when women and minorities were denied the ability to preach, to be ordained, and to lead congregational life? I wonder to what extent the struggle of American Christianity might be seen not as an inevitable demise and regression into an adolescent phase but the necessary growing pains of American Christianity into a new age, one that we are still living through and may not see the full fruit of for a few more generations. Only time will tell.

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