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Cultivating a Religionless Social Imaginary: Youth Ministry in a Secular Age

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Cultivating a Religionless Social Imaginary: Youth Ministry in a Secular Age

Abstract

"Is there any hope for those who have abandoned the church and the beliefs of their youth? More importantly, how will the Christian community engage those who turn their back on religious belief and practice?"

This paper will argue that the response and focus of the Christian community should not be to call young people back to the church, or to traditional forms of Christianity, instead the Christian community must embrace a radical form of secularity that is the outworking of protestant Christianity. This is a form of Christianity that navigates a middle road between the two idealist positions: much of orthodox Christianity that holds to a radical transcendence obsessed with some "other" spiritual dimension, and modern secularism that holds to the idealist reality of money, technology, and progress. This middle way is exemplified in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "Religionless Christianity" that calls the Christian community to embrace finite, temporal, human existence as the place where God meets us in Jesus Christ, and the object of divine love revealed in the crucifixion and resurrection. This interpretation of Christianity provides the basis for a form of youth ministry that is less about keeping young people in the church or make sure they are indoctrinated and more about helping young people embrace their humanity in Jesus Christ so they can embrace and live in world. To do this I will bring the philosophical work of Charles Taylor, specifically his book *The Secular Age*, in which he explores the historical and cultural changes that have influenced the way religious belief and faith have been understood within contemporary Western culture, into conversation with Bonhoeffer to provide the basis for a political form of youth ministry.

Keywords

youth ministry, Charles Taylor, Secular Age, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Religionless Christianity

Disciplines

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Comments

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Cultivating a Religionless Social Imaginary: Youth Ministry in a Secular Age

By: Jason Lief

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The *Vampire Weekend* song “Unbelievers” raises important questions on behalf of the current generation of adolescents and emergent adults living in the West:

I'm not excited but should I be, Is this the fate that half of the world has planned for me? I know I love you And you love the sea But what holy water contains a little drop, little drop for me?

The question is cynically put to the adult world in general, but is easily directed at the Christian community specifically. Young people are leaving organized and traditional forms of Christianity. Current research shows that a segment of young people living in the West are increasingly abandoning religion, while important contributions from academics and practitioners within the Christian community have tried to explain why they are leaving by focusing on the way young people experience religious belief and practice.

The fear and anxiety that charges this issue is present in “Unbelievers”. The singer is wondering about his fate—he doesn’t believe, and he recognizes that there are religious people who see this unbelief as a serious problem.

We know the fire awaits unbelievers, all of the sinners the same. Girl you and I will die unbelievers, bound to the tracks of the train.

Though he doesn’t believe, he has been inscribed with the idea that those who abandon religious faith will face some sort of judgment. He’s asking the community—Is there any hope? Is there grace for me even though I have rejected the religious belief of my youth, and firmly embrace the secularity of contemporary Western society? The question seems to be less, “Will I be saved?” and more “I don’t have the same beliefs as you. How are you going to deal with it?” This is the same question posed to the Christian community: Is there any hope for those who have abandoned the church and the beliefs of their youth? More importantly, how will the Christian community engage those who turn their back on religious belief and practice?

The response of the Christian community, at least in the North American context, tends to focus on ways to keep young people in the church. One approach emphasizes the practices and beliefs of the church. This perspective sees the move of young people away from the church as primarily a problem with the practices that support and nurture faith. What young people are rejecting, in this context, is characterized as a “thin” or “distorted” theology that is the result of deficient beliefs and practice. The proper response in this context is for the church to reclaim orthodox Christian beliefs (theology) and the deep meaningful practices that help transmit the tradition to others. If the church would only develop the right practices—grounded in orthodox theological beliefs—then young people would not be as quick to abandon the church. The role of culture, in this context, is to mediate the tradition. The hermeneutical task of this approach is to interpret the theological content in the language of the specific culture, but it tends to move in the direction of the tradition to culture—addressing the issues and questions young people face in contemporary culture by interpreting the tradition in a way the culture can understand.

The second approach focuses much more on the issue of cultural accommodation. This side sees young people leaving the church because the orthodox faith and practices of Christianity no longer address the issues facing contemporary Western culture. Here the focus is much more on adapting or accommodating the tradition to the issues and experience facing young people within contemporary Western culture. While the beliefs and practices of the tradition are important, the cultural issues young people face is the driving force determining how the tradition is communicated and interpreted to young people. Here, the cultural patterns are taken to be the status quo to which the gospel must both communicate and accommodate. Again, there is a hermeneutical dimension to this approach as well, but it is driven primarily from culture to the tradition, meaning the tradition must accommodate to contemporary culture.

The problem with both approaches is they fail to engage the deeper social imaginary of contemporary Western culture. The first approach tends toward a sectarian emphasis on the beliefs and practices of the church. Yes, this faith must be interpreted to speak to young people living within specific cultural and social patterns, but it sees the cultural patterns as a neutral medium—a conduit of the

tradition as it is interpreted and communicated to young people. The cultural experiences of young people are, in a certain sense, cut off from the transformative power of the gospel, tending toward a more dualistic Christian approach in which the spiritual transformation of the gospel has little impact on the cultural lives of young people.

The second approach takes the cultural experience much more seriously, but fails to recognize the ideological or, what I would call, the religious function of social and cultural patterns. This approach allows the broader cultural ideology to determine the meaning and message of the tradition, as the tradition is accommodated to, and diffused within, the issues, language, and ideology of contemporary Western culture. While it seems that culture is being taken much more seriously, it is not a deep or thick engagement—it remains thin because it does not explore the deeper social imaginary of Western culture. Thus, in the end, neither approach engages the broader social and cultural patterns in a way that opens up the possibility for the gospel to bring transformation.

What is needed is for the Christian community to engage the issue of young people leaving the church by taking seriously the formative power of the modern social imaginary on the way young people experience religious belief and practice. This means developing a hermeneutic in which the meaning and message of the Christian tradition is brought in to dialogue with the powerful ideology and religious function of contemporary Western culture. Not only must the Christian community interpret and reinterpret the tradition in order to communicate it to young people living within culture, but the community must also practice a cultural interpretation that brings to light the social imaginary that is inscribed within young people that influences the way in which the tradition is received and interpreted. When this is done it becomes clear that the problem of young people leaving the church is not an abandonment of religious belief, but the exchange of one form of faith (Christianity) for another (technocapitalist secularism).

This paper will argue that the response and focus of the Christian community should not be to call young people back to the church, or to traditional forms of Christianity, instead the Christian community must embrace a radical form of secularity that is the outworking of protestant Christianity. This is a form

of Christianity that navigates a middle road between the two idealist positions: much of orthodox Christianity that holds to a radical transcendence obsessed with some “other” spiritual dimension, and modern secularism that holds to the idealist reality of money, technology, and progress. This middle way is exemplified in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s “Religionless Christianity” that calls the Christian community to embrace finite, temporal, human existence as the place where God meets us in Jesus Christ, and the object of divine love revealed in the crucifixion and resurrection. This interpretation of Christianity provides the basis for a form of youth ministry that is less about keeping young people in the church or make sure they are indoctrinated and more about helping young people embrace their humanity in Jesus Christ so they can embrace and live in world. To do this I will bring the philosophical work of Charles Taylor, specifically his book *The Secular Age*, in which he explores the historical and cultural changes that have influences the way religious belief and faith have been understood within contemporary Western culture, into conversation with Bonhoeffer to provide the basis for a political form of youth ministry.

The Secular Age

The primary focus of Taylor’s *The Secular Age* is to explore the historical and cultural issues that shape religious belief and practice.¹ The book begins by asking important questions about the difference in religious belief and practice from the 1500’s to today: Why is belief in God more difficult in the contemporary cultural experience of the West than it was during the middle ages? What changes have made religious belief more difficult? Taylor’s answer to these questions focuses on the radical shift in what he calls “social imaginary”—what Peter Berger refers to as “plausibility structures”. The social imaginary for Taylor is a pre-rational way in which people believe the world to exist. This is what allows human beings to meaningfully inhabit a particular way of life without having to constantly think about what is happening—it’s the way people and communities experience reality. In the West, for example, automobiles are taken for granted as a part of the given world; they have become a pre-rational part of the way that people in the West make sense of the world. Every culture has its own social imaginary that is

¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

² *DBWE* 8: 372.

³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*. Subsequently referred to as *DRWF* 16

inscribed into the members of the community. We tend to only become aware of it when we travel to another culture, an experience that ruptures our way of seeing the world by showing us how things can be different.

Taylor makes the case that radical changes in religious belief and practice over the past 500 years can be attributed to the rupture and transformation of the medieval social imaginary. In the 1500's, belief in God was a given, it was almost impossible to not believe in God. Within the modern social imaginary, however, belief in God is much more problematic. He describes how the medieval world viewed the self as porous, meaning there were powers and entities that existed outside of human cognition that influenced the meaning of the world and human identity. This social imaginary meant that the very fabric of culture—every social and cultural relationship—was interwoven with this supernatural view of the world. This is what made not believing in God nearly impossible—a belief in God was woven into every part of society.

The reformation unleashed a dramatic rupture of this social imaginary, setting a trajectory for a disenchanted world and what Taylor refers to as a “buffered self.” No longer would human identity be influenced by entities and powers outside of the self, instead, the human self becomes the source from which the world is to be changed and transformed. As the world is disenchanted, the conditions are set for a Cartesian emphasis upon instrumental reason. The world becomes the material that human reason can now mold and shape through the sciences. Thus, sovereign power is transformed from a supernatural source—a divine being outside of this world that presses down upon the world, to the imminent processes of economics, politics, and the natural sciences. What is unleashed in the reformation and the renaissance is a shift in focus from the supernatural to human flourishing. Rather than the sovereign power of a deity, the focus became much more on imminent forms of power expressed through new social and cultural patterns that focused on human flourishing and well-being.

Here we find the shift in social imaginary from a belief in God as the source of culture and society to economics and politics as the means for social transformation and flourishing. Taylor, engaging the work of Foucault, describes how this new form of immanent power established the conditions for

modern institutional life grounded in the pastoral function of capitalism. Thus, the new social imaginary that shapes the way people in contemporary Western culture meaningfully live in the world is through a pragmatic, capitalist, paradigm in which money has become the last universal form of transcendence. While there remain religious expressions of belief, but these are now incorporated into the dominant worldview shaped by an economic vision of human flourishing.

Technocapitalism

The newest manifestation of the imminent power of capitalism is what Louis de Silva has named technocapitalism. The focus of this new form of capitalism is the commodification of creativity, knowledge, and relational power. Where as industrial capitalism focused on the accumulation of capital to produce goods to meet basic needs, this new form of capitalism attempts to commodify non-material processes. Gone are the old forms of hierarchical power, replaced by flattened networks that draw fluid boundaries between insiders from outsiders. In this new situation power is diffused into rapidly changing networks of relationships through technical processes and procedures that commodify and monetize creativity and knowledge. Thus, the driving force of this new capitalism is new forms of technology that enable rapid communication and connectivity. All of this leads to a new social imaginary grounded in what Zygmunt Bauman calls the “consumer society” in which individuals must turn themselves into a commodity, making themselves desirable and consumable through the rapid creation and re-creation of identity.

All of this provides an important context for thinking about issues pertaining to young people and religious belief. Taylor’s work provides the Christian community with a way to frame the problem of young people leaving the church in the terms of the radical shift in social imaginary. This allows the community to recognize that what is happening is not the abandonment of faith or religion—young people are exchanging one form of religious belief for another. Increasingly, young people find the beliefs of Christianity to be an archaic view of the world. As they walk away from traditional forms of Christianity they are embracing a secular form of religion and salvation found in the economic sphere. Here we see how the technocapitalist ideology of the consumer society provides the foundation for a new

version of salvation that focuses on the imminent manifestation of power found in the scientific and technological realm. It is through advances in technology that human identity and the social and cultural world can continually be created and re-created, addressing problems and overcoming limitations. Thus, it is this new manifestation of economic and technological power that offers a new religious view of the world in which salvation is about human flourishing, the accumulation of wealth, and the transformation of social and cultural conditions. This new religious experience has its own version of sanctification, as the institutions of social life implement new processes and procedures, grounded in technology, that allow individuals to constantly remake themselves and overcome past limitations.

The problem with current attempts to respond to this issue is that they do not recognize the pervasive hold this new social imaginary has upon the way young people make sense of the world. As the Christian community attempts to develop new processes and practices of faith formation and discipleship, either by focusing the beliefs and practices of the community or by adapting these beliefs to the new cultural experience of young people, these processes of faith formation and discipleship are merely co-opted by the technocapitalist ideology of the status quo. What I mean by this is these new processes and techniques simply become one more way for young people create and recreate an identity that is desirable or consumable by the adult world. The church ends up creating its own conditions and expectations that young people are required to meet. This is reaffirmed by the constant use of capitalist language when discussing faith and discipleship. Much of the literature is focused on “building” or “growing” faith and disciples. The problem with this is the language betrays the technocapitalist focus on processes and techniques by which we can continually construct and reconstruct identity. The focus of this constant processes is to overcome our finite, limited, humanity and become something better, more spiritual, or “higher.”

The result is the language and practice of Christian faith becomes enmeshed into the technocapitalist social imaginary. As young people increasingly are formed and shaped by a vision of life focused on human flourishing, improvement, and progress, increasingly the language and practices of orthodox or tradition Christianity give way to a secular way of life grounded in the imminent power of

economic and political forces. To put it differently, the salvation and sanctification of traditional Christianity is exchanged for the salvation and sanctification offered by the economic sphere of the secular life.

A Response

So how should the Christian community respond to this situation? The tendency has been to respond with what I call “strong” theology that focuses on helping young people live into specific beliefs and practices of the church. The church reacts by trying to make sure that young people believe certain things or act certain ways. “Strong” theology also includes the prescription of certain types of practices or techniques that can help them cultivate certain forms of faith and habits of discipleship. The problem with this approach is that it is easily co-opted by the dominant cultural ideology. This “strong” approach asserts a metaphysical vision of the world in which doctrinal beliefs become principles that correlate with some form of objective truth about God, the world, and human identity. This becomes the basis for establishing principles and processes to help young people inhabit this prescribed way of being in the world. Here, the focus is on making sure young are brought into or stay in the church, which functions as the guarantee of this objective way of life.

There is, however, an alternative way to approach this issue that challenges the technocapitalist social imaginary: the Christian community should embrace a more radical form of secularity and let young people go. Here it is very important that we distinguish between what Taylor means by secularity and what can be referred to as secularism. Secularism is a form of ideology grounded in the technocapitalist vision of the world. It focuses on cultivating a strong metaphysical vision of the world grounded in economics, technology, and science. Secularity, on the other hand, can be seen as a consequence of the reformation; it is the desacralizing of the world that values finite, temporal, human life. Secularity is a rupturing process in which human life is freed from the dominance of religious abstraction and higher principles. What is right and good about secularity is that it frees material existence from the burden of always being directed towards something higher, better, or more improved.

Within this technocapitalist context, it could be that the current task of youth ministry in the West is primarily a political one. Rather than attempt to keep young people in the church through a stronger form of orthodoxy or accommodation, the Christian community can work to “weaken” the grip of religious and cultural ideology on the lives of young people. To do this the community must loosen its grip—it needs to let go. This does not mean abandoning young people; it is giving expression to the iconoclastic power of the gospel that frees humanity from every form of ideology and abstraction. Biblically, this is expressed in Paul’s proclamation of the cross as weakness. In I Corinthians 1 he says that the cross is “foolishness” and a “stumbling block.” Within the context of the strong metaphysics of Jewish Law and Greco-Roman culture the gospel becomes a weak force that ruptured every cultural category—Jew and Gentile, Male and Female, Free and Slave—that labeled and segregated people in the ancient world. This understanding of the gospel as “weak force” functions in the same way within the contemporary experience of young people in the West, challenging every name and abstraction grounded in higher principles and processes, freeing young people to embrace their existence as finite human creatures.

In his *Papers and Letters from Prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer recognized the onset of the secular age within European culture during the early twentieth century. Rather than see this as something dangerous or an opposition to Christian faith, Bonhoeffer wondered what the secular age meant for church. He posed the question in the terms of “Who is Jesus Christ for the secular age?” It’s not that Bonhoeffer wanted to let go of Christianity or the church; he was exploring the meaning of the death and resurrection of Christ for the world. The meaning of Christ’s death and resurrection is found in the midst of a Christian community that embraces the new humanity revealed in Jesus Christ. This is a community that takes responsibility for the other—takes responsibility for this world—and does not subjugate the other to higher principles of ethics and morality. In his writing *After Ten Years* Bonhoeffer writes, “Who stands firm? Only the one whose ultimate standard is not his reason, his principles, conscience, freedom, or virtue; only the one who is prepared to sacrifice all of these when, in faith and in relationship to God

alone, he is called to obedient and responsible action. Such a person is the responsible one, whose life is to be nothing but a response to God's question and call. Where are the responsible ones?"

The question that must be asked of youth ministry in the West is not, "How do we keep young people in the church?" or "How do we get young people to believe Christian dogma and morality?", but How does the Christian community communicate the love of God for humanity revealed in Jesus Christ that calls young people to a responsibility to and for the world? How does the church bear witness to the new humanity of Jesus Christ in a way that inspires young people leave behind the false realities of technocapitalist ideology disguised as Christian piety?

The Politics of Youth Ministry

This political task of youth ministry is to practice what Paulo Freire refers to as "conscientization." He uses this term to refer to the political function of teaching that humanizes young people by awakening them to their historical situation. At its core this pedagogical approach awakens young people from an ideologically induced slumber—helping young people to reclaim a sense of human agency within their historical and cultural context. The goal is to help young people become aware of the oppressive social and cultural patterns that are taken for granted as reality, or the way the world is. By helping them ask important questions of the status quo, by introducing them to alternative ways of thinking, and helping them develop the linguistic tools to interpret their historical situation, this way of teaching fosters a political agency in which young people can begin to take responsibility for their own humanity and the humanity of others. This, I believe, must become the function of youth ministry within the context of the Christian community.

To become a community that employs this critical pedagogy of conscientization means the community engage in two primary tasks. The first is to embrace the radical secularity at the core of the Christian message. Paul's proclamation of the gospel in Galatia and Corinth radically subverts the cultural ideology of the ancient world, unleashing a secularizing force that opens up the space for human agency. The political implications of this can be seen in the way the gospel ruptures the cultural hierarchy, poking holes in the metaphysical reality of the ancient world, making possible the formation of a new community

of love in which identity is grounded in the new humanity of Jesus Christ. The gospel unleashes a humanizing force within the ancient world that seeks to affirm the humanity of all of those outside the structures of power, specifically women, children, slaves, and the sick, weak, and disabled. It is this humanizing force that creates space for human agency—individuals are no longer defined by the ideological labels and cultural patterns, they are empowered by the Holy Spirit to embrace their humanity by taking responsibility for their neighbors. In this way “love” as it is described by Paul is a secularizing force that breaks apart every strong cultural and religious category in order to create space for difference.

Another way of talking about this is to say that the gospel unleashes a demythologizing force that unmasks and ruptures every form of ideology. For Bonhoeffer, this meant that Christianity must enter a new phase—it must become “religionless”. To support this idea Bonhoeffer appeals to Bultmann’s project of “demythologization.” He writes:

A few more words about ‘religionlessness’. You probably remember Bultmann’s essay on ‘demythologizing the New Testament.’ My opinion of it today would be that he went not “too far,” as most people thought, but rather not far enough. It’s not only “mythological” concepts like miracles, ascension, and so on (which in principles can’t be separated from concepts of God, faith, etc.!) that are problematic, but “religious” concepts as such. You can’t separate God from the miracles (as Bultmann thinks); instead, you must be able to interpret and proclaim them both “nonreligiously.”²

In a letter written in 1942 Bonhoeffer expresses his appreciation for Bultmann’s project. He writes:

He has dared to say what many repress in themselves (here I include myself) without having overcome it. He thereby has rendered a service to intellectual integrity and honesty. Many brothers oppose him with a hypocritical faith and that I find deadly. Now an account must be given. I would like to speak with Bultmann about this and open myself to the fresh air that comes from him. But then the window has to be shut again. Otherwise the susceptible will too easily catch a cold.³

Here we can see that Bonhoeffer’s “religionless” impulse, grounded in his appreciation of Bultmann’s project of demythologization, represents an iconoclastic impulse that takes aim at every religious and ethical abstraction he strongly opposed. Only Bonhoeffer believed that Bultmann didn’t go

² *DBWE* 8: 372.

³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*. Subsequently referred to as *DBWE* 16.

far enough. In a letter written in June 1944 Bonhoeffer engages the question of the relationship between Christ and the “world come of age” by critiquing Bultmann. He writes:

As for Bultmann, he seems to have sensed Barth’s limitations somehow, but misunderstands it in the sense of liberal theology, and thus falls into typical liberal reductionism (the “mythological” elements in Christianity are taken out, thus reducing Christianity to its “essence”). My view, however, is that the full content, including the “mythological” concepts, must remain—the New Testament is not a mythological dressing up of a universal truth, but this mythology (resurrection and so forth) is the thing itself!—but that these concepts must now be interpreted in a way that does not make religion the condition for faith.⁴

This mythological affirmation points to a two-part movement within Bonhoeffer’s “religionless Christianity.” The first is the iconoclastic move of the cross in which every form of idealist abstraction and every oppressive form of reification is negated, freeing the world and humanity to become the creation and creature that God intends for it to be. Bonhoeffer interprets the cross of Jesus Christ as a force that ruptures or weakens every ideology—both religious and cultural—that tries to claim absolute truth about the world. For Bonhoeffer, the process of demythologization not only applies to scripture or theology, it also applies to the ideological and religious functions of culture that control and dehumanize.

The “demythologizing” power of the cross is followed by a second move, resurrection, that “re-mythologizes” the world according to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and the presence of the new humanity existing in and for the world. This second move establishes a poetic ontology that evades the constant process of reification and abstraction. This poetic re-mythologization of the world in Jesus Christ is not a re-enchantment of the world but a re-description of the world that opens it to a new reality and the possibility of a new future in Jesus Christ. This resonates with the hermeneutical work of Paul Ricoeur regarding truth, metaphor, and the poetic.⁵ “Metaphor” according to Ricoeur, disrupts and ruptures the “old order” and brings forth a new one, which results in the creation of new meaning by re-describing

⁴ *DBWE* 8:430.

⁵ For a conversation on the hermeneutical nature of Bonhoeffer’s work see Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmermann, *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought*.

reality. Ricoeur argues for the power of the poetic as the power to initiate a process of iconoclasm and new creation. He writes:

What is being suggested, then, is this: should we not say that metaphor destroys an order only to invent a new one; and that the category-mistake is nothing but the complement of a logic of discovery?...Pushing this thought to the limit, one must say that metaphor bears information because it “re-describes” reality. Thus, the category-mistake is the de-constructive intermediary phase between description and re-description.”⁶

This act of re-description, for Ricoeur, speaks to the power of the biblical narrative. He writes, “The paradoxical universe of the sacred, we said, is internally ‘bound.’ The paradoxical universe of the parable, the proverb, and the eschatological saying, on the contrary, is a ‘burst’ or an ‘exploded’ universe.”⁷

Ricoeur addresses the historical development of secularity as a move from a mythical or enchanted world and into a scientific and rational one. He discusses how the sacred is no longer objectively found in the world, as it was in former historical epochs. This leads him to ask important questions about the sacred in relation to the world, and whether humanity can live without it. He describes the iconoclastic movement of the enlightenment, and takes this development as a given—realizing there is no going back. Yet, he makes the argument that cosmic symbolism that once revealed the sacred in the world did not die, it has been “transformed in passing from the realm of the sacred to that of proclamation.”⁸ Thus it is in proclamation of the word that the world is “re-described”; the old order is ruptured by the poetic and mythic gospel and the identity of creation and humanity is given new meaning and a new future.

Ricoeur’s schema of poetic language establishes an iconoclastic dialectic in which the old order is ruptured by a new creation that re-describes the world. This, I believe, is the same dialectic found in Bonhoeffer’s articulation of “religionless Christianity.” The iconoclastic rupture of religious and ethical abstraction creates space for the revelation of God in Jesus Christ as the revealed truth about the identity

⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor*, 22.

⁷ Paul Ricoeur and Mark I. Wallace, *Figuring the Sacred*, 60.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

of God, humanity, creation, and the opening of the future. Thus, “religionless Christianity,” as a process of “demythologization,” gives way to the proclamation of Jesus Christ as the “center” of created life through a process of “re-mythologization.” Bonhoeffer is not calling for the Christian community to accommodate itself to the presuppositions of the secularized and disenchanting world; he is calling the community to reclaim the poetic and mythological power of the gospel that re-describes the world and the identity of humanity in the context of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This dialectic of iconoclasm and re-description is the fundamental task of the Christian community as it addresses the lived experience of young people in the West. As the social imaginaries of young people have been formed and shaped by the economic function of secularism the lives of young people are increasingly fragmented and abstracted. They are alienated from their embodied existence as the diverse complexity of their humanity is reduced to an economic function. Given the commodification of young people previously discussed it is essential that youth ministry take up the movements of iconoclasm and re-description. This means proclaiming the word about Jesus Christ into the lives of young people through the use of “limit-expressions that bring about the rupturing of ordinary speech.”⁹ The economic and technological discourse at work in the lives of young people needs to be challenged, and the world of young people, including their humanity, needs to be re-described so that they might embrace their humanity in response to the call of God heard and seen in Jesus Christ. This hermeneutical task provides the context for the Christian community to engage the lives of young people by taking seriously the significant cultural issues relating to faith and identity.

At the heart of this approach is the issue of agency: How might youth ministry become a space in which the agency of young people is taken seriously? Rather than becoming one more form of religious ideology that abstracts the lives of young people, enslaving them to an impossible ideal that renders them irresponsible, how can the Christian community help young people live into the new humanity of Jesus Christ? For Bonhoeffer, it is the new humanity revealed in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that

⁹ Ibid., 60.

makes possible human agency. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, the community is able to live and act, not according to some ideal or abstract ethic, but within the context of the concrete realities of this world. The Pauline vision of Christian love is a rupturing way of being in the world that refuses to abdicate responsibility for the neighbor, insisting that it is the concrete reality of this world that is to be embraced. This form of love is a secularizing force that strips away every ideological foundation for meaning and identity.

The lived experience of young people in the West has become wrought with violence. The social and cultural institutions young people inhabit are increasingly driven by attempts to commodify every part of human life. Daily life consists of a constant negotiation and re-negotiation of identity in order to maintain positions of power and influence. This constant attempt to live into cultural abstraction has fostered anxiety and despair as young people fail to measure up. Consequently, the rise of fundamentalism in both religion and politics has led to rhetoric grounded in a violent rejection of difference. These cultural and religious forces render young people irresponsible, lacking agency, unable or unwilling to engage the other in love.

As young people leave institutionalized forms of the Christian community, the church must think carefully about how it might respond. In the United States the focus has tended towards a sectarian emphasis on faith formation, doctrinal teaching, and practices that strengthen moral and religious beliefs. While on the surface this might seem to be a good way forward, it does not address the deeper social and cultural issues discussed above. Often, these new practices become one more layer of religious ideology that gets in the way of responsible action. This is why a new pedagogy is needed—one that awakens young people to the reality of their new humanity in Jesus Christ. This is a communal pedagogy focused on conscientization and agency, opening the eyes of young people to the powers at work in the world, and equipping the community to help young people claim their humanity in the context of these powers.

What might a political approach to youth ministry look like? In broad terms it means helping young people navigate the social and cultural terrain, equipping them with the tools needed to gain access to certain networks of power, while at the same time helping them become aware of the ideological forces

at work shaping their social imaginary. In order for young people to begin practicing the dialectic of demythologization and remythologization, they need to develop an awareness of their historical situation and the significant issues facing them at this historical and cultural moment. What does this look like more concretely? I can only answer out of my context—a rural community in the middle of the United States. Here, religious and cultural ideologies are enmeshed in in such a way that it's difficult to locate their boundaries. The purpose of youth ministry in this context has traditional been seen as a way to indoctrinate young people into a specific way of life. In this context Christian beliefs and practice easily turn into a means of control that keeps young people from participating in the transformation of their social and cultural situation. How might a “religionless” approach to youth ministry provide a different focus?

1. A political understanding of the task of youth ministry will challenge the dualistic approach to Christian faith that separates the embodied cultural life of young people from the transformative power of the gospel.
2. A political approach equips young people with important skills necessary for negotiating the power structures of the status quo. This means helping young people cultivate the cognitive tools necessary to successfully use educational systems—to graduate, not just with degrees, but with knowledge and wisdom needed to bring transformation to communities, neighborhoods, and cultivate a way of new way of being in the world.
3. A political approach equips young people with skills necessary to live as part of a community. Basic skills that help young people develop confidence and self-reliance. Skills like cooking, gardening, woodworking, farming, carpentry, camping, etc.
4. A political approach that helps young people embrace difference—helping them see how their way of seeing the world is not absolute, but a basis from which to experience our neighbor in dialogue and love.
5. A political approach equips young people to critically engage in popular culture. Becoming more than just consumers, but through their consumption help young people create new avenues of self-expression and agency. One way to do this is to create spaces where young people can create pop culture, such as

opening an affordable recording studio to provide a communal space where they can learn to creatively produce their own music.

All of this is wrapped in the narrative of scripture as young people are immersed in the stories that reveal God's love for finite humanity in Jesus Christ—a love which brings forth a new humanity, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to live as a community of love in and for the world.

These are just a few examples of how the Christian community can help young people live into their humanity by embracing secularity. Rather than attempt to establish one more form of ideological abstraction through the imposition of transcendent theology and morality, the community can help young people narrate their lives in the context of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ through a poetic demythologization and re-narration of the world.