

The American Cultural Context for Adolescent Catechesis

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In the reflection that follows, I discuss aspects of the cultural context in which catechesis occurs among young American Catholics. I start with the common sense observation that handing on the faith never occurs in a vacuum. Aside from individual, life-cycle and interpersonal family dynamics, a complex array of social, cultural, and historical factors, each with their own mechanisms and patterns, both foster and impede this process.

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The American Cultural Context

Young people today—and at an ever younger age—are exposed to numerous cultural forces with significant implications for faith development. These forces include a pervasive commercialism, the blandishments of mass marketing, and a pop culture milieu saturated with violence and hyper-sexuality. They also include increasing age and generational segregation along with transformations in how we define ‘family.’ There is also the communications revolution globalized through the Internet. This digital revolution dramatically facilitates networking and the ability to access and convey information. Through chat rooms, weblogs, MySpace.com, spam and games, it influences the computer savvy young and competes aggressively for their attention.

In addition to these influences, Catholicism in America continues to be transformed by a new church and world relationship stemming from Vatican II and by the demise of the ethnic Catholic subcultures that long carried Catholic identity. (“New wave” Hispanic and Asian Catholic immigrants as obvious exceptions to these trends). The waning of anti-Catholicism, long-term alterations in the Catholic class structure, and growing evangelical influences on Catholics are also elements of the wider cultural *Gestalt* impacting the task of catechesis.

The American Religious Gestalt

What about the religious temper of American culture? What relevant trends contextualize the transmission of faith?

While many aspects of the contemporary religious *Gestalt* are important, three stand out: religious diversity, the commodification of religion, and the enduring influence of American individualism.

Religious Diversity

No society is as religiously diverse as the United States. Our religious diversity is kaleidoscopic. Every major world religion can be found in America today. Religious diversity means not only the presence of world religions, but differences *within* them, an ever-curious array of “sects and cults”, and the spread of new and increasingly unconventional forms of individual spirituality.

One view, although now something of a minority one, sees



Prayer room at the 2006 National Conference on Catholic Youth Ministry – Riviera Convention Center, Las Vegas
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religious diversity in more negative terms, especially where this diversity promotes an attitude of “religious pluralism” that is perceived as corrosive of religious certitudes. Accordingly, and especially in a political environment that separates church and state, religious pluralism relativizes all religious beliefs, weakens claims to uniqueness, and promotes the privatization of religion and a deeper cultural relativism encapsulated in the “I-have-my-truth-you-have-your-truth” view of reality.¹

This perception of the relativizing impact of religious pluralism stems from a growing awareness of historical contingency and of the socially constructed nature of *all* human knowledge. It also derives from contradictions and logical falsifications posed by competing religious claims. And it is promoted by a postmodern cultural climate in which civility and the aversion to being perceived as “intolerant” or “judgmental” temper tendencies toward assertive or absolutistic claims on the part of many individuals.

Collaterally, and especially within the parameters of Christianity in America,

religious diversity also gives expression to a denominational sensibility. This, too, has important consequences with regard to relativism, even where denominational loyalty has grown weaker, and where “liberal” or “conservative” value orientations are often stronger predictors of belief and behavior than denominational identity per se.

Denominationalism is a form of religious association. Denominational membership is *strictly* voluntary and typically reflects “social sources” relating to race, class and ethnicity. Unlike sects, denominations are more culturally accommodating. And, while each denomination is more or less a faithful expression of the Christian tradition, *none* makes any absolute claim to objective fidelity to the will of Christ or to being *the* Church founded by Christ. While a denomination may not regard all other denominations as orthodox, the concept presupposes equality not only before the law, but in terms of giving up claims to comprehensiveness and supremacy. Many Americans think of religious institutions in terms of this denominational sense.

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Religious diversity, especially where it fosters competitiveness among religious groups, responds to the logic of market niche needs. Competitiveness stimulates organizational vitality. Accordingly, groups do well that

eliminate free-riders, that develop distinct identities, that make “stricter” membership demands, that achieve appropriate levels of tension with the surrounding culture, and that “sell” better (supernatural) products. In contrast to the lethargic situation in Europe, much of the vitality of religion in America has been attributed to our diverse and free market religious economy.²

The Commodification of Religion

A second important cultural *Gestalt* is the commodification of religion. By commodification I mean the tendency in a commercially-driven society for religious wares (especially symbols and rituals) to be transformed into “things” and objects of consumption. This is significant because it works to the detriment of these symbols and rituals to signify a community with a common faith identity and to connect the individual using them with other community values and norms mediated by these symbols.

Religion is hardly exempt from the commercial pressures of post-industrial capitalism. Consider how difficult it is for religious traditions to control their symbols—in contrast to the ability of corporate America to do so. Religious symbols and practices are often fragmented, lifted from traditional contexts, and bastardized by commercial, therapeutic and entertainment interests. They sell other products (cars, real estate, computers) and are, themselves, reduced to aesthetic artifacts and “life style” commodities. They are easily transformed into objects of choice serving the needs of identity enhancement, especially for those deprived of traditional sources of identity. Rosaries, crucifixes and crosses become fashion accessories; sculptures of the Buddha become yard and garden art, and so forth.

In the Wild West realm of American popular culture, entertainers like Madonna have been extremely adept at manipulating religious symbols to commercial advantage—whatever else the alleged rationale for their display. The “Material Girl’s” employment of Sanskrit symbolism, Jewish Kabbalah (red strings) and, currently, crucifixion imagery, renders these symbols cultural fodder for highly individualized and, not insignificantly, highly narcissistic needs and statements. As religious symbols increasingly

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become matters of individual choice and manipulation, the familial, cultural and institutional networks that stabilize their particular meaning further diminish in strength.³

One important implication of the commodification of religion is that religious traditions increasingly function not so much as communities of faith, but as cultural tool-kits. They provide an array of religious “stuff” from which it is possible to construct an individualized religious identity or, in the case of something like the current popular appropriation of yoga meditation/exercise, a discipline largely oriented toward beauty and health-care needs. This tool-kit dynamic is facilitated both by the scope of religious diversity in America and where there are significant numbers of institutionally disconnected “spiritual seekers.”

Religious Individualism

A third cultural context for catechesis has to do with the influence of individualism. Individualism is a pre-eminent American cultural code. It touches virtually every aspect of American life. It is closely related to the ethic of commodification I have just described. For many Americans, the ultimate criterion of identity and lifestyle validity is *individual* choice. As the sociologist Christian Smith has observed, it is by choosing a product, a mate, a lifestyle, an identity—and a religion—that one makes it one’s very own: personal, special, and meaningful.

Such a dynamic stands in contrast to what is “merely” inherited, assumed, or passed on as part of a collective identity.⁴

The individualism I am highlighting here is not, of course, something uniformly negative. Individualism is good where it exemplifies personal maturity and a sense of ownership and responsibility. In the Catholic case, individualism is important where it exemplifies laity rightfully acting as producers—and not merely consumers—of their tradition. Catholic identity (like all authentic religious identity) necessitates personal and responsible self-appropriation.

What I am pointing to here is an excessive individualism that accentuates personal autonomy, jeopardizes the common good, and eviscerates the experience of community and commitment. Where religion becomes highly individualistic, it also tends to become more subjective, more privatized, and more loosely tied to institutional expressions. It becomes another example of Robert Putnam’s “bowling alone” phenomenon—a metaphor for the trend toward disengagement in the civic sphere.

As I previously noted, religious identities and practices in contemporary American culture are increasingly viewed as individual projects. They express the preeminent norm of “choice.” Outside of more conservative and fundamentalist-like enclaves, or those in which ethnic bonds remain strong, they are less likely to be bound by any doctrinal or creedal categories. They are also less social and communal in strength—in spite of an apparent paradox.

On the one hand, religious institutions are obviously alive and well. Thriving congregations and parishes can be found in many places. The majority of Americans belong to some type of religious organization.

On the other hand, a spate of research over the last four decades shows that significant numbers of Americans believe that involvement in religious institutions is no longer necessary or, in some cases, even desirable. The number of Americans who self-identify as religious “nones” has been gradually increasing (14 percent). There has also been a long-term decline in many mainline denominations. And, although “mega-churches” have become popular, they do not evoke strong institutional loyalties or have

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a strong theology of church. They appeal largely because they are consumer friendly and satisfy *individual* needs, not community ones.

Another indication of the cultural power of individualism is the uncoupling of spirituality from religion. For a significant number of Americans, there is little or no connection between being spiritual and being part of a historic tradition or a disciplined community. You know: “I’m spiritual, but not religious.” Studies also show that significant numbers of Americans believe that a person should arrive at his or her religious beliefs (and practices) independent of any external religious authority. In summary, as Alan Wolf observes in his book *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith* (2003), when people today speak of their relationship to a religious institution, it is often not primarily in terms of its rules and ecclesiastical structures per se, but in terms of their own spiritual quest and their *individual* needs in this regard.

The Power of Religious Individualism

The pervasiveness of religious individualism stems in part from the hegemonic influence of Protestantism in American culture. It is also a by-product of skepticism toward institutions of any kind growing out of the social and cultural turmoil of the 1960s.

Heightened individualism also reflects complex cultural processes relating to identity construction in a postmodern context, especially among the more affluent social classes—where more and more American Catholics now reside.

Briefly, the meaning of ‘identity’ today emphasizes its self-constructed nature, especially in the context of the fragmentation and radical openness of social life, the pluralizing of contexts of action, global cultural synthesis, and the

mixing of diverse authorities. In the postmodern context, many individuals select a world of significance from a variety of choices. They do so largely on the basis of individual consumer preference. They try to negotiate and sustain a coherent, yet continuously revived biographical narrative within options that are filtered through the media and various social systems. One consequence is that traditional patterns of authority are attenuated. This is because any given form of authority—including religious authority—is but one “authority” among others, part of the indefinite pluralism of choice and expertise in the postmodern context.⁵

The Impact of the Cultural Context

The degree to which the cultural dynamics I have summarized here—religious diversity, the commodification of religion, and religious individualism—actually impact American Catholic adolescence is an empirical question. Cultural dynamics are never uniform across generational cohorts. Nevertheless, American Catholics of all ages are hardly immune from these influences.

Studies show that significant numbers of Catholics, especially younger ones, are weakly connected to institutional Catholicism even as they continue to maintain a ‘Catholic identity.’ Many have embraced a denominational ethos, have a weak or diffused sense of the tradition, and express their Catholicism along more individualistic lines. In our highly consumerist cultural context, many Catholics—young and old—live as self-defined Catholics without depending on the Church for normative authority to do so. They practice more of a consumer Catholicism than an institutionally validated one.⁶

The Cultural Challenges of Doing Adolescent Catechesis

The cultural setting for Catholics in American society is now vastly different. The environment has changed from the hostile one of the 19th and first half of the 20th century to the accommodating one of today. Controversies such as those over the legitimacy of Catholic schools, alleged Vatican control of American Catholics, and Catholic loyalty to American political ideals are largely a thing of the past.

A Church once apart is now one included. Religious diversity, the commodification of religion, and religious individualism are also all aspects of this new situation. They are highly relevant to doing catechesis within it.

In the context of religious diversity, catechesis must not only speak to ecumenism and interfaith dialogue; it must also address the challenges posed by relativism, the denominational mentality, and the emphasis on a generic “Christian lifestyle.” In such a context, what is unique and distinct about the tradition must also find expression. As James Davidson, Dean Hoge and their respective colleagues observed in their studies of young American Catholics, a religious education that emphasizes ecumenism and a common Christian heritage but that fails to include a focus on what is distinctive about being Catholic—and *why that matters*—will have detrimental consequences for the future of the Church.⁷

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This is not a resurrection of ‘triumphalism.’ It is not about disparaging what is different about non-Catholic traditions, or about promoting intolerance. It is about affirming in positive ways the value of Catholic’s communal, ecclesial and sacramental dimensions.

Catechesis must also address the challenges surrounding the commodification of religion. Young Catholics today must learn how to make a responsible reappropriation of the Tradition's symbols and rituals while protecting their integrity as such from the fetish of consumerism. How they do so is complicated where these elements of faith and identity are easily trivialized through therapeutic and entertainment pirating as I indicated earlier and through egregious holiday commercialism at times like Easter and Christmas. The task is also problematic where knowledge of the meaning of these rituals and symbols within the historical and theological development of the Tradition is weak, and where symbolic expression within Catholicism has, itself, experienced a certain leveling-down.

It is also obvious that sound catechesis must address the cultural ethos of individualism and tendencies to see the Catholicism as another life-style "choice," a purely individual appropriation, or even as a "me and Jesus" sensibility—replete with a sacramental and ritual veneer—that otherwise has little communal or institutional significance. Catholicism is a profoundly communal tradition, not a Lone Ranger one.

In addressing all of these challenges, it is important to remember that handing on the faith is never a matter of handing on doctrine alone; it is the handing on of a broader sense of belonging and connectedness to a living tradition. The problem today is not the decline in Catholic identity—even as that identity is contested and re-defined; it is the decline in Catholic communalism and the commitment to the Church's institutional expressions.

The social and institutional ecology of the Church must find new vitality in the face of the cultural trends I have described. The atrophy of Catholicism's communal participation and the need for a socially embedded experience of the Tradition (in ministries, parish life, associations, societies, and in prayer, social justice, and formation groups) must also be addressed in catechetical efforts if the Church is to engage and transform American culture from a position of vitality and strength.



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