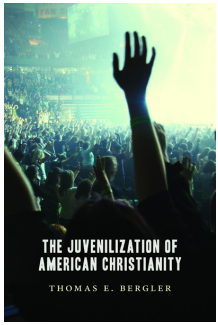
The Juvenilization of American Christianity, by Thomas E. Bergler



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This is a confessional work of historical missiology that also deserves a wider, secular reading. From the perspective of reception history scholarship, it offers an exemplary study in how religious traditions engage with, accommodate, and resist the emergence of late modern culture in pre- and post-WWII United States. In focussing on four Christian traditions—conservative Evangelicalism, progressive Methodism, African-American Protestantism, and the Roman Catholic church—it is also a more thorough and comparative analysis than one often encounters. Moreover, it demonstrates the reduced importance of religious literacy amongst many ostensibly very religious people, as the emphasis on doctrinal continuity and theological literacy is replaced across two generations with an emphasis on entertainment, activism and therapeutic emotion; the continued transition, in other words, of Christianity from a phenomenon principally grounded in the transmission of scriptural tradition to one grounded in the reproduction of personal experience.

After the introductory chapter, two general historical chapters outline the emergence of this youth-focussed Christianity. Four chapters focus on the four traditions, with chapter 7 analyzing the solidification of the process in the 1960s. A final chapter offers a largely confessional assessment of the phenomenon, but it is one based in solid historical and sociological studies.

The introductory chapter outlines the core elements of the juvenilization thesis: socio-cultural changes that establish a cultural framework for en-

gagement with religious tradition, albeit generally analyzed via ecclesiological and pastoral phenomena rather than the literary and visual culture reception scholars prefer. Individualization is unsurprisingly significant, but so too is cultural competition as a subset of the broader (but unstated) religious markets thesis; competition exists not only between churches but, most basically, between secular and sacred culture generally. This means creating Christian analogues to secular popular cultural forms, not just music and literature, but sports and even beauty contests. This competition takes place within the broader culture of mass consumerism wherein religion competes to provide both entertainment and the building blocks of identity formation and performance. Enter the professional Youth Minister as part of the further social division and specialization of late modernity that also sees religion generally become an "extracurricular activity" for most American youth. Underlying this is the half-conscious recognition that Bergler brings out very well throughout the book that Christianity is being re-articulated as a "lifestyle enhancement" (220) consisting of "commodities promoting personal fulfillment for those who wish to partake" (129).

A further constitutive element of juvenilization is the discovery and celebration of youth itself as a distinct social and political subjectivity; a supposedly uniquely energetic people. Chapter 1 argues that these changes did not originate in the post-WWII period when the emergence of adolescence as a distinct life stage of delayed responsibilities and mass consumerism is generally located, but back in the 1930s. This was a time not of hope, but of desperation, when "the potential, peril, and confusion of adolescence seemed to parallel the distress of American civilization" (23). Juvenilization is not intended, therefore, as a (wholly) disparaging term; there was no sense that engaging the world and worldview of young people necessitated a downwards cultural slide. Juvenilization is not infantilization. The view was rather that if the youth do not save (or doom) all humanity, they might at least save (or doom) the church. The problem, as Bergler sees it, is overestimating the political power of youth as an undifferentiated social category—even "a powerful force of nature" (45)—and naïve views of youth culture.

In some ways, Bergler is in synch with conservative Christian critics of popular music and culture. His is certainly not the fundamentalist critique that there is something demonic (or worse, socialist) in post-WWII pop culture, but something like the critique of the renowned scholar of church music Erik Routley who was concerned with the consequences of splitting congregations along generational lines. Routley and Bergler are also both critical

of the notion that the genre norms of secular youth culture are value-neutral such that these genres can be hollowed out with a spiritual message replacing a secular one. Rather, both argue, genres of popular culture represent and relate to particular subjectivities.

Bergler's juvenilization thesis pivots on the point that the methods used to engage youth mid-twentieth century became the key methods to engaging them—and all subsequent generations of children and adults—in subsequent decades. Indeed, youth ministry is described as a "laboratory" for new expressions of religion that have subsequently stuck. This drift of youth ministry into inter- and cross-generational ministry has led to a "chronic immaturity" (207), the author argues. Yet the crux of the juvenilization problematic is that core elements of juvenilization—particularly focussing on emotion and enjoyment—are shown to "work" in the sense of keeping young people in churches into adulthood. Thus American Evangelicalism emerges, predictably enough, as the most compatible with the emerging culture insofar as believing that humanity would be saved by being converted, and it would be converted by promoting Christianity in an entertaining way as the most enjoyable and personally fulfilling lifestyle option.

Yet it is not merely the Evangelical religious shift into spectacle and what would now be referred to as the experience economy that is responsible for, or constitutive of, juvenilization. Indeed, the *interaction* between the four traditions is an especially revealing aspect of the study; one gets an excellent sense of how different approaches to emergent changes in American society play themselves out. There is a certain amount of dramatic irony, also, knowing that which is being initially resisted by liberal and politically progressive churches will be shortly incorporated into their practices. Indeed, the Methodists emerge as charmingly naïve in their belief that post-WWII youth would rather selflessly build a more egalitarian America than become "jive hounds" or "hepcats" (48). Amongst progressive Catholic youth, Bergler cites the dilemma of advocating radical reform of the capitalist system among young people who were not only appreciative of the efforts of their parents to achieve financial comfort (and win a place in middle class America once closed to them), but increasingly seduced by consumerism. Rather than criticizing Sinatra for failing to live up to Catholic social teaching, many Catholic youth were happy to have a prominent Catholic to identify with (58–61).

From a social scientific approach, there are various questions one might raise about the core thesis and the use of data. The book assimilates much of what is very good in the contemporary analysis of religion, youth, and

culture, including the religious markets theory which, whatever its flaws as a general theory of religion, does make a certain sense, in certain situations, like the United States in the mid-twentieth century. Much of it is unstated, however, and the study could have made better reference to these, in the sense that there are many complementary theories and studies for scholars to follow up, or that simply analyze similar cultural changes from a different perspective. Thus the juvenilization thesis is not especially original insofar as its constitutive socio-cultural changes are well recognized. This is not a criticism, since the same thing could be said of most contemporary theories of social and cultural change. But there is, none the less, a minimum of explicit engagement with proximate cultural and social scientific theory and investigation such that the juvenilization thesis appears more like a theological descriptor when broader social changes associated with liberal individualism become merely "the legacy of teenage rebelliousness" (222).

The juvenilization thesis is most clearly reminiscent of Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead's better-known subjectivization thesis of religious individualization and detraditionalization in late modernity; notably in its emphasis on personal and emotional connection rather than doctrinal fidelity, coupled with the decline in institutional authority and commitment. This is most apparent in the fifth chapter's analysis of Catholic juvenilization in the 1950s; Catholic education produced many confident, critical thinkers—but confident, critical thinkers who were not prepared to accept the religious indoctrination they were offered by these same institutions. Instead, the common notion of spiritual "seeking" took hold. Something similar is analyzed within progressive Methodism in chapter 3; the church promoted social activism which lead to a critical view of the ordered, largely middle class white world of American Methodism itself. At same time, by focussing their energy on youth activism, progressive Methodists, African-American churches, and some Catholic youth organizations lost touch with the vast majority of their members who were not interested in activism—reminding us once again that the 1960s counterculture captured only a fragment of the cohort.

Regarding the use of data, one clear issue is the somewhat scattered use of evidence. On one hand this is indicative of the comparative nature of the research; analyzing four traditions over four decades. Yet only occasionally does the study refer to available large-scale studies like Gallop surveys. The focus on changes in the Evangelical Vatican called Nashville in chapter 4's analysis of African-American juvenilization is very revealing, but otherwise data within chapters is rather more eclectic than it might otherwise have

needed to be. Bergler also over-estimates the current vibrancy of religion in the United States (209–10); recent studies show that Americans born after 1980 are significantly less religiously committed than the generations in this study, the first and second to experience juvenilization. Moreover, the oft-repeated figure of forty percent of Americans attending church each week is based on opinion surveys (which Bergler himself notes often provoke people to provide what they think is the *correct* answer rather than an *accurate* answer) which may double the actual number of attendees. This generational decline, combined with the comparative resilience of Evangelicalism (in increasingly Pentecostal articulations), puts an interesting spin on the overall analysis, generally strengthening it.

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