The Kids are Alright
Re-Thinking Problem-Based Approaches to Adolescent Spirituality

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Abstract

Discussions of adolescence and youth spirituality often focus primarily on the problems that need to be fixed in youth or their context. This essay draws upon positive youth development theory, which asserts that youth are much more than problems or at-risk. It affirms that all youth have resources that can be developed and contributions to make to their communities. This essay reviews the pervasiveness of problem-based approaches in the larger society and contemporary research on the religious lives of youth. It also calls theologians and youth workers to contribute to the shifting perspective of youth by re-imaging youth spiritual maturity as more than “adult like” and to offer a theology of adolescence which explicitly affirms youth engagement as partners with God, right now.

Keywords

positive youth development – engagement – adolescents – practical theology – theology of adolescence

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The kids are alright is a simple, but profound assertion about the state of adolescents around the globe. It also proposes an alternative starting point for research and ministry with youth. In particular, this paper explores the significance of starting with an assumption that youth are “okay”—that they are capable and have the necessary skills to flourish in a global society and to contribute to religious communities, right now. This statement may appear simultaneously oxymoronic and naive. The majority of early scientific studies of adolescence, as well as scholarly and popular perspectives, equated adolescence with chaos and turmoil. Therefore by definition adolescents cannot be alright.1 For others, there is a real fear that this statement could lead to the dismissal of problems that plague the lives of so many young people—physically, psychologically, and socially. Therefore affirming that kids are okay could undermine efforts to help youth. At the same time, many working with youth are encouraged (and sometimes surprised) by the examples of resilience and fortitude many youth demonstrate (even if not consistently) in the face of myriad struggles. Attending to each of these perspectives, this essay affirms both that the kids are alright and that starting here pushes research and ministry with youth into unprecedented areas.

Problem-centred approaches permeate much of academic research and other arenas of life. However, what happens if one starts with a different set of assumptions? What changes when one approaches adolescents and ministry from the starting place that they are not broken, but alright; that young people are brilliant, fearfully and wonderfully made?2 In particular, this essay explores

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Lerner offers a succinct overview of the history of the scientific study of adolescence, beginning with Stanley Hall's two-volume work, Adolescence: Its psychology and its relations to physiology, anthropology, sociology, sex, crime, religion, and education (1904). Hall emphasised the idea of adolescence as a period of “storm and stress” – and even though this extreme vision, based on his theories of evolutionary science, was questioned then, his vision of adolescence as stressful upheaval persisted, even in the works of Anna Freud and Erik Erikson. Lerner argues, “for the first 85 years of the scientific study of adolescent development, the field was framed almost exclusively by a deficit perspective about this period.” Building upon this scientific study of adolescence many in youth ministry and theology have also continued with a primarily deficit or problem based approach to youth. Some examples are discussed below.

2 Paraphrase of Psalm 139:14, New International Version.
these questions by offering a brief review of *Positive Youth Development* theory and practice. It also reviews examples of the ongoing impact of *problem-based* approaches in the larger society, the lives of youth, and contemporary research on the religious lives of youth. The essay also proposes means for Christian theologians and youth workers to contribute to the shifting perspective of children and youth. Therefore, while remaining aware of the risk of naively calling for a *positive* approach to youth and youth ministry, this paper asserts that this shift will effect much more than descriptions of youth, but also the types of programs and ministry created with children and youth.

1 Positive Youth Development Theory

The major theoretical work, which undergirds the shift to a more positive starting point in studying children and youth, took place in public policy, psychology, and even medical studies in the 1990s. “Positive Youth Development” theory, programs, and policies start with a vision of youth as “resources to be developed” and not as a problem to be fixed. While this shift emerged some twenty-five years ago, there is a much longer and more insidious history of deficit models in adolescent developmental theory and mental health fields. Educator William Damon writes in a 2004 article that the positive youth development approach “grew out of dissatisfaction with a predominant view that underestimated the true capacities of young people by focusing on their deficits rather than their developmental potentials...”

The impact of that early research and shift was felt primarily in understandings of the nature of the child, the interactions between the child and the community, and the moral growth of children. The shift helped practitioners and parents rethink who children and youth are and to reconceptualise the hallmarks of this group. It has also changed the understandings of the roles youth play and can play within their communities and various contexts, now. Positive youth development theories and research pushed practitioners and scholars to re-imagine the type of moral decision making capacities youth have and can

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develop. Scholars and youth workers began to rethink the contributions of young people to their communities and their own development; and to see youth and children as full partners in the community-child relation. In particular, Damon reflects on the emergence of “expectations” for how youth will contribute to their communities as part of healthy development.

However, is this shift a minor semantics issue? Is it simply a casual reframing of our language with youth? I argue that continued problem-based approaches to youth development and spirituality are complex and multifarious; and that significant work is required for these changes to take hold in religious programs as well.

### 1.1 The Problem of Problem-Based Approaches

Throughout the early to mid-twentieth century, adolescent developmental theories focused on problems such as: learning disabilities, affective disorders, antisocial conduct, low motivation and achievement, drinking, drug use, smoking, psychosocial crises triggered by puberty (and growing up), and risks of neglect, abuse, and economic deprivation that plague certain youth populations. This focus on problems also translated into pervasive labels and images of youth, which we have not distanced ourselves from today. These labels include, among others: at risk, bully, juvenile delinquent, and super predator.

Such labels have had an impact far beyond developmental psychology and appear in myriad arenas, including the larger culture, media, the U.S. criminal justice system, youth self-perceptions and theological discourse.

#### 1.1.1 Culture and Criminal Justice System

Educator and cultural theorist Henry Giroux, along with many others, describes the complicated ways that children and youth are portrayed in popular media, as well as scholarly literature. Giroux’s assessment of youth in movies and media points to the complex power of these depictions in how adults interact with different youth populations and provide resources for youth. Giroux notes the interconnections of race and class with particularly negative labels of American youth, while simultaneously perpetuating a mythology of childhood innocence for white and middle class youth. For example, in the wake of increasing suburban school shootings during the 1990s (and even more

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5 Ibid.
6 Ibid, 20.
7 Ibid, 14.
8 Ibid.
recently), the media discourse remained one of shock at how white, middle class youth could do such horrible things. The discourse was that these white youth were “psychologically troubled.” However, Giroux argues that if these shootings were committed by Black, Latino, or urban youth, they would have been “denounced as bearers of a social pathology.” More recently, similar discrepancies in how adolescents are viewed, including which youth get to be cherished as beloved children, continues to flood American news. The practice of defaming or blaming minority youth who are victims of violent crimes is widely seen as a common sense justification, in the media coverage and trials (or lack of indictments) for their deaths. In other words, pervasive and problem-based labels of Black and Latino youth (as threatening, thugs, dangerous, etc.) makes killing these youth justifiable.

While a full summary of Giroux’s discussion of the rationale behind these discrepancies and the pervasiveness of racial profiling and racism in the criminal justice system, exceeds the scope of this article, his analysis is helpful in outlining the impact of negative (problem based) labels on the perceptions of all youth and on particular groups of youth. Giroux notes that the pervasive view of youth as problems (or even as “innocent beings,” not worthy of dignity and to be agents in their own lives) has created both a culture of disposability (in which some youth can simply be disposed of) and a high demand for “kid-fixing” services.

Among these “kid-fixing” services, Giroux includes prisons for poorer teens and mental health treatment centres for the “more health-insured” children. Closely connected to Giroux’s analysis of the impact in media is an equally

10 Examples from the last three years include the highly publicised and debated deaths of Trayvon Martin (February 26, 2012), Jordan Davis (November 23, 2012), Renisha McBride (November 2, 2013), Michael Brown (August 9, 2014), and Tamir Rice (November 22, 2014); as well as countless other deaths where the public response demonstrated extreme polarities in the U.S. population and debates ensued about the influence of racial profiling or valuing of black lives.

11 Giroux, 10. In the decades since Giroux’s essay, we still see the effects of this culture of disposability and policies. For example, Michelle Alexander’s New Jim Crow discusses mass incarceration and cradle to prison pipeline which persists in part because of the devaluing and persistence of problem based approaches to children and youth, particularly African American and Hispanic youth.
12 Ibid, 11.
pervasive, and possibly more detrimental, connection between negative labels of youth and the U.S. criminal justice system in the lives of youth. Historically the U.S. criminal justice system has emphasised punishment over prevention. In addition, in many cases, the criminal justice system stood as the central institution and litmus test of successful adolescence. The major “developmental” thrust for youth was simply to prevent them from going to jail. This translated into a general, but predominant idea that if one can “diagnose the problem” early enough then we can “weed it out.” If we can prevent the problems, then all will be well.13

1.1.2 Youth Self-Perceptions
Young people have also internalised this method of focusing on problems and the ever-present negative images of themselves and their peers. Over the years of conducting research with youth, I often start by asking youth to describe where they are from and what people should know about their towns. (These responses are both positive and negative). The follow up questions ask young people if there are things that they are concerned about or things that make them proud in their schools, communities, friends, and churches.

The youth interviewed are often considered some of the best and brightest of their communities; yet, they too demonstrate understandings of their communities and other young people around them, which reflect the internalisation of negative labels. One young woman’s narrative offers an example of youth self-perceptions. When Jackie was asked about her community and if there was anything that she or other young people were concerned about, she stated:

I’m concerned that each generation is getting worse, and in my school I can see it getting worse...each grade is full of more people that don’t care about school ... and just don’t really care about their grades. [And in my hometown] there are a lot of gangs. There’s a lot of drugs. A lot of people

13 However, the shift towards positive youth development theories and programing raised questions of whether prevention was sufficient or whether young people also needed parameters for development and flourishing. For example, Richard M. Lerner and Peter Benson L. Developmental Assets and Asset-building Communities: Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice. (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2003), 7 as they assert that Preventing a problem from occurring does not guarantee that youth are being provided with the assets they need for developing in a positive manner. Even if prevention efforts were completely successful, it is not the case that ‘problem-free means prepared’; that is, preventing problems among young people does not mean that they are capable of making positive, healthy contributions to family community, and civil society.
smoke and stuff, so my concern is that everyone is going to let that type of life get in the way of the life they should have...I live in a pretty good community. My school is a good school. They’re not awful people or anything. But I just hope that they realise that life’s not all about gangs and drugs and being ghetto and stuff like that.14

Jackie’s comments contain an implicit vision of a “life that youth should have” and a concern that youth will succumb to the pressures of “gangs and drugs” and “ghetto stuff.” Jackie’s narrative is not unique in her concern for her peers and peer pressure, neither is it unique in her parroting of popular negative language often mapped onto urban and youth communities, like the word “ghetto.” This section of her interview, and in the narratives of many other youth, reveals examples of the internalised fears, labels, and negative images, that youth hold and the impact of these on the lives of youth. For example, Jackie does not focus on a lack of programs, resources, or opportunities for youth in her community. Instead, she too focuses on keeping youth out of destructive communities (gangs) and off drugs.

1.1.3 Youth and Theological Discourse
Alongside the prevalence of problem focused depictions of youth and children within developmental literature, the larger culture and even among young people; the core of this article focuses on practical theologians and youth ministers who also reflect the preponderance of negative images of youth and the impact of these images on ministry and the religious formation of youth. Theologian and ethicist, James Fowler observes more than a simple one-dimensional problem-focused understanding of youth, instead he writes that he has observed “a curious oscillation in our portrayal and imaging of youth.”15 Utilising vivid theological language, Fowler posits that there have been both an Eschatological and an Apocalyptic vision of youth.16 The oscillations include a “romanticised” view of young people who represent hope to correct all the corrupt parts of adult society and more recently a vision of:

14 Jackie is a pseudonym for an African American and Latina high school aged youth who attended the Youth Theological Initiative Summer Academy at Emory University, during 2008–2010.
16 Ibid.
Latch key kids brought up on junk food and thirty hours of television a week; hollow-eyed witnesses to three hundred thousand commercials and one hundred thousand TV murders before they leave high school; ... This is a dark, apocalyptic vision, tinged with flames and urban decay, or with the vacant eyes of privileged suburban teens rich in things but poor in soul.

Fowler argues that both visions are wrong, as they are primarily “projections of successive adult generations’ feelings of optimism or dread, of hope or anxiety about our society, about our churches, about our future.”¹⁷ Like Giroux, Fowler points to the ways that these adult projections play into adolescent development and therefore raise questions of how these false images can be corrected, such that the fullness of youth is expressed and not merely adult fears or dreams writ large.

It is here that a serious dialogue with positive youth development theory and programming (and a move away from models of fixing youth problems, be they social or religious) would benefit theologians and youth workers.

2 Beyond Problems, Naiveté, and False Projections: A Closer Look at the Spirituality of U.S. Youth

As noted above, according to William Damon positive youth development is not an attempt to gloss over challenges which surround youth daily; instead this approach starts with “strong defining assumptions about what is important to look at if we are to accurately capture the full potential of all young people to learn and thrive in the diverse settings where they live.”¹⁸ In other words:

While the positive youth development approach recognises the existence of adversities and developmental challenges that may affect children in various ways, it resists conceiving of the developmental process mainly as an effort to overcome deficits and risk. Instead, it begins with a vision of a fully able child eager to explore the world, gain competence, and acquire the capacity to contribute importantly to the world.¹⁹

Damon begins with a very simple assertion: “Every child has talents, strengths, and interests that offer the child potential for a bright future.”²⁰ He includes all

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¹⁷ Ibid.
¹⁸ Damon, 20.
¹⁹ Ibid.
²⁰ Damon, 13.
youth, even the ones from the most disadvantaged backgrounds and communities. Taking seriously the caution of Fowler, this does not mean all adult hopes and unfulfilled promises are pinned on young people; but it does mean that each young person, regardless of their current circumstances is seen as fully able—full of talents, interests, skills, potential and wisdom. Damon’s research pushes youth workers to reflect on whether or not the starting assumption when working with youth and when designing the “best youth ministries” possible is that youth are capable.

In spite of the shift in developmental psychology, educational theory and research, the larger culture has remained reticent to fully embrace this shift towards a vision of youth as capable and wise, particularly for minority youth. This is also particularly true within youth ministries, congregations, and religious engagement with youth.

2.1 Problem-Based, Deficit Youth Spirituality

Focusing on the religious lives of youth in the U.S. reveals significant problematic images and deficit-based assumptions, as well. Some of the most popular research on the religious lives of American youth could be summarised with the narrative that youth are missing something. Youth, themselves, are either missing some virtue or capacity, or the programs and communities that have nurtured youth have failed to give them something—and therefore youth and youth spirituality are missing something. The overarching narrative is that youth have somehow received a mutant form of religious life. Moreover, religious leaders, parents, and communities have to fix the youth in order to stop the problem. More specifically, among the popular descriptions of the religious

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21 Mary Elizabeth Moore (Dean of Boston University’s School of Theology) has been conducting research over the past 15 years, collecting the narratives of youth across the United States. Her research is novel in that she framed it around the idea of collecting the “wisdom of youth.” Her team is still collecting data and therefore detailed findings are not available.

22 From Damon, we see that PYD and its defining understanding of the nature of childhood was to focus on “sustaining these positive strengths and building upon them, rather than on extinguishing young people’s maladaptive tendencies.” (17)

23 It is important to note that youth development research and youth ministry research are not designed to accomplish or reveal the same findings. By definition and scope of the research projects, they are starting in very different places. However, placing them in conversation offers youth workers insights that should not be overlooked in terms of the scope, approach, and starting point of research and ministry praxis with youth.
lives of youth, in the past ten years, (including several attributes I have ascribed to and posited) are the assertions that:

1. **Youth are inarticulate about their faith.**

   Christian Smith in the National Survey of Youth Religion, which takes seriously the religious lives of youth in a way heretofore not done, notes that American teens, across the traditions, are inarticulate about their faith and traditions. His research team attempted to gauge the interest and religious ideas of youth by tracking their language use. They explored both what youth talked about and how often they used key words and phrases. While they utilised other research tools as well:

   this method was one means of assessing U.S. teenagers' relative orientations to religious and therapeutic concerns. We systematically counted in our interview transcripts the number of teenagers who made reference to specific subjects or phrases of interest. We found, first, that relatively few U.S. teenagers made reference in their interviews to a variety of historically central religious and theological ideas.

   Smith and his team concluded that youth spirituality did not reflect their traditions of origin. Instead of articulating the central tenets of their traditions, he notes that teen religion more closely reflected vague ideas being happy and good.

2. **Youth are practicing a parasitic religion of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.**

   Another central point of Christian Smith’s research is that across traditions youth are practicing moralistic therapeutic deism (MTD),

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24 These represent the more pressing trends or assessment of youth and youth religiosity during the past decade, not as a direct criticism of the findings or methodologies undergirding each of the research project. They also reflect the places where our statements about youth spirituality has intersected with popular media and/or public life. This list of trends is also incomplete and other voices could be included.


which focuses only on being good and happy. MTD also treats God as a Divine therapist or cosmic butler. While noting that youth would never utilise this label, Smith argues that this form of youth religion is the most pervasive and is reflective of innumerable trends within the larger society. It depicts youth spiritually as focusing on what God can do for youth and intimates that youth are not expressing the highest values of their religious traditions. Kenda Creasy Dean expands upon Smith’s research and looks specifically at Christian youth. She concludes that youth are Almost Christian—youth are not practicing “true Christianity.” Both of these popular theories paint a deficit, problem-based picture of youth and youth spirituality. It is not based on what the larger society can learn from youth, but it highlights how youth fail to conform to what is already established as true historically from their religious tradition.

3. Youth spirituality is individualistic and fragmented.

Similarly, religious educator and practical theologian, Almeda Wright builds on the work of Evelyn Parker, and notes a trend among young people to fragment their spirituality—to separate their love of a Personal Jesus from a Public Faith. Looking particularly at the religious lives of African American youth, Wright and Parker both note that when youth encountered critical societal issues (such as experiences of racism), they disconnected them from their understandings of faith and their ability to act. In Wright’s assessment, young people were missing public and communal dimensions of the Christian tradition and were more invested in the personal dimensions of Christianity.

4. Youth are religiously alienated.

Over the past few years, a lot of attention has been given to the “increasing number of Nones” in the United States. This term originates in the concern that there are more religiously unaffiliated people, particularly in

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26 Ibid.
28 However, the starting place (presumably) that there is some problem which needs to be corrected among youth (or youth programs or work with youth) sets us up to see youth as mutants and not as revolutionaries in the ever evolving nature of religion and institutional life.
29 See Evelyn Parker, Trouble Don’t Last Always (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2003), 29–51.
the late adolescence and early adulthood. A Pew Foundation poll (October 2012) reported an increase among those who self-identify as “no religion in particular” and the headlines read: “Nones on the Rise.” This last way of describing youth religious understandings is both old and new, as many mainline protestant denominations have rehearsed over the years, that young adults are fleeing churches in droves. It again paints youth primarily as problematic in their failure to affiliate.

Recounting these negative descriptors of youth spirituality is not an attempt to undermine the research or call the data into question. However, this brief snapshot problematises the starting assumptions of the research and resultant visions of youth. Each theory (or at least the way that they have been presented and interpreted) centres on a problem, on something that needs to be fixed in youth (and sometimes churches). Starting with the problems, however, often obscures the hopeful dimensions that youth ministry workers and churches want to cultivate in youth, and it fails to fully articulate a vision of healthy religious development in youth.

2.2 Same Data—Shifting Perspective

Looking at the same theories and data sets, what emerges if the starting assumption is that the “kids are alright”? One easy answer is that the adults and churches are the ones that are messed up. There may be some veracity to that, but that also assumes a problem, which must be ameliorated (and it just shifts the blame from youth to adults). However, if we choose not to place blame, what emerges from the data as collected if we start with the assumptions that the kids are capable, wise and full of potential?


It is also important to note that this data has been revisited to point to the fact that while the range is increasing the implications is not necessarily that Americans are less religious or becoming increasingly less religious. What the sociologist are arguing instead is that there is an increase in feeling comfortable with the label of “not religiously affiliated.” The surveys did not show a change in practices or beliefs, but in self-identification.

33 It is beyond the scope of this article to determine what the starting assumptions of each researcher was (beyond those disclosed in their work). However, it is important to note that different questions and surveys could have been constructed had they started with different assumptions about the nature of youth and youth religiosity.
Christian Smith demonstrates that youth, while inarticulate about their faith, are still for the most part actively involved in communities of faith and are reflections of the faith of their parents. The second phase of the NSYR also demonstrates only a slight attenuation of religious practices during early adulthood. The researchers note that the markers of religiosity tend to shift in emphasis but young people remain closely aligned with the religion of their parents and communities of origin.34

Kenda Creasy Dean passionately chastises mainline denominations for creating Moralist Therapeutic Deists youth, who are almost Christian. However, if one reads beyond the provocative title and overview of the problems presented by Christian Smith’s research, Dean begins to offer insights for the positive religious development of young people. Dean hones in on what she calls the “most devout” of the youth surveyed. She describes feeling “Mormon Envy.” Dean explores how the Mormon community is able to instill in teens a deep connection to their religious communities and ownership of their faith.35 Dean outlines characteristics and traits of consequential faith. Dean’s list is not the definitive list of positive youth spirituality, neither do I offer her book as the essential credo for youth ministry; but she offers a glimpse of how starting with an assumption that at least some youth are “getting it right” can open us to new and more holistic theories and practices with youth. Her work also begins the type of conversation advocated for in this essay, that we begin to see all youth as capable and ask what youth workers and institutions can do to honour these capabilities.

Similarly, in Wright’s research, while noting many ways that youth spirituality is fragmented (disconnected from other arenas of their lives); she found that young people are also fully capable and already participating in complicated theological reflection and spiritual practices. Wright calls for an emphasis on integrated-integrating spirituality where youth participate in ongoing critical theological reflection and actions in the world around them. Wright is

34 Lisa D. Pearce and Melinda Lundquist Denton. A Faith of Their Own: Stability and Change in the Religiosity of America’s Adolescents. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 11. In particular, Pearce and Denton offer a helpful rubric of youth religiosity, which looks at more than religious content. The differences they note in young adult religiosity reflects shifts in how centrally their beliefs/practices remain, not a total shifting in the content of beliefs or practices. (11–29)

35 In addition to higher rates of religious literacy and participation among Mormons, the NSYR data demonstrate that youth in conservative Christian denominations and African American denominations also rated higher on many markers of religiosity. This offers some counter evidence that the kids are alright.
able to call for this type of spiritual integration, because her research sample already includes youth who are capable of public theological reflection; actively involved in their communities; and interested in spiritual disciplines and renewal.36

Even the increasing numbers of youth and young adults who self identify as having no religious affiliation is not as bleak as presented. In a panel convened to discuss the response to this data in August 2013, major sociologist and contributors proclaimed that even in the face of this data, worship of God and religious affiliation is still alive and well. Despite the overstated fears of the secularising of American religion,37 what is expressed in this data is an increase in the level of comfort with which Americans describe their religious identities. It is not a drastic change in how often they attend church or how important religion remains in their lives. Thus, these common narratives of youth spirituality include much more than problems or brokenness. While it remains popular to sensationalise the religious crises among adolescents, the truth is the kids are really alright.

Nevertheless, what remains problematic in most research on youth spirituality is that when we start with a deficit-based model, we often default to a definition of success as "being like the adults," or like the highest articulated values within a particular tradition. However, does this go far enough? Undoubtedly, youth benefit from the involvement of adults in their religious lives and in their understandings of the world. Moreover, scholars and practitioners are just beginning to grapple with the implications of trusting youth to engage religiously without requiring youth to do it in the exact ways as previous generations. Missing from the conversation is the persuasive case for why conforming to or even engaging with the tradition is a sufficient marker of religious maturity. The research findings and strategies often explicitly or implicitly attempt to keep the tradition alive and to keep youth in congregations; but they do not actually empower youth for service to the world around them. In other words, most youth religious development stops with competence, or mastery of the tradition and practices, without creating space for youth to contribute and possibly transform the tradition.

While, it is an important first step to support youth engagement in adult traditions and institutions; it is also important to honour the space for youth to

36 See Almeda M. Wright, "Integrated-Integrating Pedagogy: A Practical Theological analysis of fragmented spirituality among African American adolescents" (PhD dissertation, Emory University, 2010). http://pid.emory.edu/ark:/25593/8kfj0.

37 This fear has been articulated in Harvey Cox’s work on the Secular City, and other works by sociologist of religion, such as Peter Berger in the 1960–70s.
say, “I want something else” or “I want to do it differently” – and to be full partners in the community of faith. The primary markers of successful youth spirituality and development cannot remain conformity with a static tradition. Spiritual and religious maturity must also include space to honour dissonance and disconnection as a means of youth development.38

3 A New Starting Place: Towards a New Theological Vision of Youth Development

Paulo Freire, in working with oppressed and marginalised communities, continuously reminds would-be allies that they must love, have faith in, and trust the people in order to work with them towards mutual liberation and transformation.39 My initial reading of Freire was that loving the oppressed and marginalised was the most important. However, trusting the people to be full and active participants in their self-definition and flourishing is a more difficult task. This connects with the push towards a starting place of positive youth ministry development. If youth are perpetually presented as problems, which need to be fixed, then their own agency is not trusted and undermined in the midst of their transformation and development. We do not create space to learn with youth what they will become and how they will create the future they want to live into.

Trusting youth and their own agency and self-definition, requires a dramatic shift, particularly within religious communities, where conformity to institutional norms was seen as essential. However, within the Christian tradition, there are examples of youth agency and transformation, which already open the way for this “shift.” Therefore, I argue that rethinking the starting assumptions of our research with youth will include a different theology of adolescence, with a vision of youth as full partners in the youth-religious community partnership.

3.1 Towards a Positive Theology of Adolescence

Many of the challenges of effectively ministering with youth and helping them develop in life and faith are grounded in a very challenging and somewhat over

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38 This is only a peripheral concern in Christian Smith’s work (and I think it is missing in Deans—even though she alludes to it in earlier works such as Practicing Passion, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004.)

problem-based theological anthropology. A theology of adolescence forces us to wrestle with the questions of what does God have to say about adolescents? In addition, who are young people to, in, and with God? In other words, it is difficult, but imperative for youth ministers to fully embrace a theology of adolescence that includes the fullness of adolescents as made in the image of God, right now. In particular, youth workers and youth themselves often implicitly struggle with questions of:

- Are youth more than deviant/deficient forms of fully mature, adult life?
- Must youth wait to become more like God, when they grow up?
- Are adolescents worthy of God’s love and care?
- Do youth need to develop more in order to participate in the work and life of faith?

These are both simple and complicated questions. Moreover, there are few to no comprehensive theologies of adolescence, which do not begin with the assumption that youth are broken – or that because of biology or culture they are especially prone to deviance or abnormality. In part, this tendency is not particular to theological reflections on adolescence. Much of the problematic theological anthropology reflects larger Christian theological traditions, many of which hold to an understanding of original sin.

Adolescents are often viewed as “almost adult” which can get translated as “mutant/deviant adults,” and in its most pejorative iterations as “almost human.” Within religious communities youth do not fair much better. However, the paradox of Christianity and theological reflections on youth is that simultaneously there is an undervaluing of youth and a narrative of the problematic, corrupt, and sinful nature of all humans (particularly youth); yet, the Christian Biblical tradition includes significant narratives and examples of the strength,

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40 A few notable exceptions include allusions to the need for a theology of adolescence by Fowler, David White, and many practical theologians who help us to theologically reflect on the life cycle, such as Friedrich Schweitzer, and on practices with youth, such as K. Dean, Chap Clark, among others.

41 The doctrine of original sin is the belief that humankind “inherits” a sinful nature as a result of Adam and Eve’s rebellion in the Garden of Eden and the subsequent fall of humanity. First articulated by Irenaeus in the second century, this pervasive doctrine has been developed throughout the years by Augustine, Calvin, Luther and myriad other theologians. It remains a central tenant in much of Christendom. See the entry on “Original Sin” in F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds. The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church. 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1202–1204.
encourage, and faithfulness of young people. This biblical cloud of youth witnesses includes diverse figures such as Miriam, Moses’ older sister whose agency set a course for the liberation of her people; the boy Samuel, whose mother commits him to the service of the Prophet; young David; the young boy who shares his lunch in the Gospel of John’s narrative of the feeding of the 5000; and even narratives of the adolescent Jesus who gets lost listening in the Temple.42 While we can see the vast and overarching effects of negative images of youth and youth adults, there is within the Christian tradition youth exemplars and sources to reclaim and reemphasise as sources of a more positive theology of adolescence. In other words, Christianity is replete with examples of God’s work in and through young people – such that it is more problematic to theologically justify the negative images of youth than it is to embrace a vision of God’s love for youth and embodiment in and through youth.

It is not sufficient that these narratives exist. Instead, we must seriously wrestle with how to apply and live into the witness contained in these narratives. However, in existing, these narratives offer a reminder of a more helpful model of both theological anthropology and the contemporary roles of youth within religious communities and society. The dominant narrative about youth does not need to remain that they are problems – who must develop out of their mutant state into some idealised adult form. Thus, a positive theology of adolescence is more than a robust theological anthropology, or even an embracing of the idea of imago dei. It pushes for a theology of adolescence, which is more than a liminal phase—a theology that embraces the already-right now qualities of adolescents and sees them as full partners with God and in the community of faith-youth relationship.

3.2 Taking the Risk of Full Partnership with God: Honouring and Cultivating the Capacities of Youth

In general, positive youth development theory has pushed practitioners and youth workers to cultivate different visions and models for the flourishing of

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42 For some, the narratives of youth within the Bible seem insignificant. However, within the U.S. context, in which a growing majority of American Christians and youth workers are evangelical and see the Bible as a primary (if not the primary) source of theological reflection and construction, reflecting on the biblical narrative is paramount. The narratives referenced can be found in Exodus 2:1–10, 1 Samuel 1–3, 1 Samuel 17, John 6:1–15, and Luke 2:41–52, respectively. Other interesting narratives include: Mary, the teen mother of Jesus. (Luke 1) and Jesus’ response to his disciples when children come to him – saying “Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not, for such is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 19:14).
young people. It pushed beyond fixing problems, emphasising “problem free is not fully prepared.” From this, a more robust conversation about the communities and institutions involved in the development of young people emerged, as well as lists of markers of positive youth development. Positive youth development theory drew heavily upon Bronfenbrenner’s model of ecological human development, which affirmed that children and youth develop through interactions with their social environment. It also offers a strong reminder that youth are not merely influenced by adults and communities, but youth “are actively involved in shaping their own development; what’s more, they influence the events that happen around them. They are participants, not just recipients.”

Within many religious communities the idea of youth of participation and even partnership remains radical and risky. For the past century, debates within youth ministry have ensued over whether nurture or evangelism should be the major thrust, or if youth must regurgitate the catechism or develop their own creeds in order to become “members” of their congregations. However, embracing the capacities of youth and their roles within these communities as full partners has not taken centre stage.

Therefore, if as the research suggests, youth develop best as full participants then we have to rethink what youth religious development looks like to fully include this dimension of youth. Some practical theologians have affirmed the need for youth to feel connected and sense of belonging in religious communities and for youth to feel affirmed in their vocation callings within their religious communities. Religious communities must do more than honour youth, but they must open up the community of faith to transformation (for good)

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44 Ibid, 11. Several lists of desirable youth outcomes emerged during the 1990s. Pittman summarises this discussion here, but it is important to note that others had somewhat longer list and differing definitions of the “5Cs of Confidence, Character, Competence, Connection, and Contribution.”

45 Urie Bronfenbrenner, The ecology of human development. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979) See also http://www.actforyouth.net/youth_development/research/ for a brief synopsis of Bronfenbrenner’s contribution to positive youth development theory.

46 Ibid. See also Karen Pittman’s discussion of the fact that, the shift in youth development theory from problem free was not enough. Positive youth development theory had to evolve to also affirm that “fully prepared is not fully engaged.”
from the contributions of youth. In theological terms, this is a reminder of the ongoing work of God in the world and the call to all, adults and youth to partner with God in this work.

Affirming that kids are alright is much more than a statement of how youth are currently doing, but it is an ontological statement that affirms who youth are developmentally and spiritually. It affirms that youth are not problems to fix, but that they have resources to develop. It affirms that youth are full partners, right now in the child-community partnership. Young people have gifts to offer the community of faith and need to be empowered to fully engage in the lives of these communities. This includes full partnership in the construction of and reflection on theology and theological truths within communities. It is not simply a parroting back of core beliefs, but it is engaging in a community in which the beliefs and values are discussed and lived out.

The life of faith and communities are incomplete without the thriving and contributions of children and youth—as they are right now, not simply in the future. Certainly, there is a risk that communities, traditions, and even religious practices will change in the process, but it is a risk that needs to be taken. Moreover, while I have borrowed from the insights of positive youth development and note the significance of these methods for the overall wellbeing and development of youth; I argue that shifting our starting assumptions about youth and honouring their contributions is a spiritual and ministry imperative, even as or more importantly than it is a social imperative.

References


