

## UNDERSTANDING TEENAGERS: POST-MODERNISM OR HYPERMODERNISM? BY MARK ROQUES

*The culture of teenagers is something from which we cannot escape, but about which we may feel we know nothing. It can seem baffling and alien to someone from a different generation. The essential equipment of the teenage bedroom consists of a television set, a music system, a personal computer with Internet access and sometimes even a microwave. This apparent material sophistication often masks a spiritual emptiness. Here, Mark Roques analyses some of the influences on teenagers today, identifies their responses and outlines the nature of the challenge facing a Church which is viewed by many teenagers as remote.*

Popular culture is all-pervasive. Enter a newsagent and you will be assaulted by a vast number of magazines. Enter a video hire shop and you will encounter hundreds of films. Enter your local kebab outlet and you will be molested by adverts and video games. It's everywhere... omnipresent and begging to be touched and explored.

All of these cultural artefacts are religious tracts; they witness to their creators' beliefs and convictions. Popular culture is belief-incarnate. Witty, vivacious and talented people externalise their beliefs and convictions as they conjure up stories, adverts and video-games – Andy Cole, the Manchester United striker, appears in a Reebok advert; he seems despondent and lugubrious. He has neglected to purchase expensive Reebok boots and in this parallel universe he has become a chip shop assistant. Reebok challenges us with the following words of warning – *There are other boots. But there are other careers.*

This is a powerful and effective tract; a consumerist symbol and altar call. And teenagers indwell this potent and exploding world. This world of popular culture is narrative-rich. For example in the popular magazine *Loaded*, we are exposed to the lives of Frank Warren and Vinnie Jones. Young people indwell these stories and learn their values and convictions from such narratives. Frank Warren, the successful boxing promoter, incarnates a favourite story. Once upon a time, Mr. Warren was poor, obscure and unimportant. With ruthless and impressive determination Mr Warren has struggled against a hostile world and he is now rich, powerful and "successful". This is an intoxicating and bracing story and many young people would like to follow in his footsteps. Frank is very candid about his view of life: "I've always enjoyed what I earn, I've always gone after the good things in life, heh heh! That's what it's all about – you're only here once, you should enjoy it. I've come from nothing, I've had to fight for everything I've got and I will carry on fighting; that's what I'm good at."<sup>1</sup>

As teenagers peruse such stories they become enchanted and bewitched by these stories of rags to riches; powerless, poor and ambitious people become in time powerful, rich and happy people. "If only I could be like them..." murmurs our fifteen-year old boy as he reads his favourite football magazine. David Beckham, despite his World Cup woes, remains a captivating and tantalising figure... the cockney boy who "done good" by playing footie for Man United, marrying Posh Spice and earning £8 million a year! What an icon!

We need to understand that young people are disciplined by these kinds of stories. They catch their beliefs and values from these (to them) breathtaking yarns. Without overt instruction and evangelisation young people are initiated into a capitalist religion of the survival of the fittest. And this is the power of popular culture; furtively

yet rampantly the inner and outer lives of teenagers are shaped and moulded by this cultural cocktail; normality and abnormality are “caught” as teenagers indwell this colourful and seductive jamboree. Without doubt there are teenagers who resist this cultural onslaught; determined and enthusiastic parents can nurture alternative belief-systems to the prevailing values but popular culture exercises an enormous and hegemonic influence.

But what do young people believe? Many recent discussions would seem to suggest that teenagers are post-modernist; this is the trendy, all-embracing catchphrase but there is a dangerous over-simplification in this analysis. Many teenagers are not strictly speaking post-modernist; many proclaim the slogans of modernism. One of my Year Nine students boldly informed me that “We’re animals sir; that’s what science tells us.” Others have proclaimed the positivist conviction that science is the unique and royal road to truth and knowledge. “Science gives us the facts, sir!” Such statements are not uncommon. It is true, however, that many teenagers are embracing much more post-modernist attitudes. On one occasion I was discussing the nature of the afterlife and the issue of judgement. I had challenged the dominant otherworldly and platonic view of heaven and argued for the shocking and rarely mentioned idea that we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth. Immediately one of my Year Eight students aggressively raised her hand and declared “Heaven will be exactly what you believe it to be!” Staggered and surprised by her answer, I breathed deeply and distracted my class from my discomfort by telling a joke.

In understanding the answer of that student we can begin to discern the key feature of post-modernism. It’s impossible in very brief compass to say a lot about something as complicated as post-modernism and what I will say is necessarily inadequate and superficial but like the fool who spouts clichés and truisms, I would suggest the following. Modernism often seeks to persuade us that facts are discovered by humans as they surrender to the revelation of science; values, on the other hand, are invented by humans. Post-modernism challenges this framework by insisting that humans invent *both* so-called facts and values. It is not only morality that we freely conjure; but the universe as well! And the comment of that Year Eight girl stands firmly in the post-modernist camp. We don’t discover the way the world is because we ourselves make it up. The title of Nelson Goodman’s book *Ways of Worldmaking* strikingly evokes this post-modernist vision.

It seems to me that post-modernism exaggerates and heightens the human desire for autonomy that modernism itself once proclaimed so fervently! The role of science, however, remained a curious impediment to the humanist longing for freedom because it forced the humanist to submit to the fixed and rigid determinism of science. Post-modernists are very uncomfortable when science, for example, suggests that all human behaviour is controlled by our chromosomes! Such scientific “discoveries” repel and irritate post-modernists precisely because they long for the freedom to create their own values *and* their own universes. We do not discover biological laws, nor do we discover heaven or hell. We, sovereignly, create the entire cosmos.

In the light of this analysis, I would argue that most teenagers today are divided between modernist and post-modernist beliefs. The modernist faith in science and technology is still alive and well. The humanist creed and its false gospel of scientific control and domination are still among us. Many teenagers still exude the old-fashioned and rather naive scientism of Richard Dawkins and David Attenborough. Fascinatingly, we would do well to notice that both modernism and post-modernism inspire and nurture a moral relativism among many teenagers. The belief that values

are up to us; the belief that sexual ethics, for example is a matter of personal taste is very widespread. “No one’s got the right to tell me what to do! I am a law-unto-myself” seems to be the pervasive perspective.

Although post-modernism and hypermodernism (modernism gasping and shrieking in its death rattle) are hegemonic and omnipresent, fringe world-views are breaking through. Some teenagers are embracing deep ecology (Swampy), neo-paganism and neo-fascism but in Britain these perspectives are not, as yet, rampant! There are some teenagers who believe seriously in alien-abduction but this is unusual; most teenagers embrace secularism either in its modernist or post-modernist garbs.

In this cultural context how then do most teenagers view the church? This is a crucial and painful question. Many teenagers find the church both baffling and off-putting. A few years ago the notorious *Viz* magazine satirised the modern church by spoofing a church advertisement. “Come to Church – It’s Great” ran the slogan. A kindly, if rather insipid, vicar extended his hand in greeting. What precisely was this vicar selling? The answer is both revealing and distressing – christenings, weddings, choirs, funerals and jumble sales! Sadly this spoof makes many of us laugh and our sniggers and guffaws tell us something about a church that does not infuse the typical teenager with a thirsting for wisdom, justice, righteousness and a careful stewardship of the planet.

In conclusion, we must recognise that teenagers are disciplined by the narratives and the inspiring figures of our age. Indwelling this cultural tapestry, their imaginations are baptised and energised; in short, they learn to live and scheme as they dream and drool about Tom Cruise, Demi Moore, and Michael Owen. Sadly, Christians must understand that our culture offers very few compelling and appealing Christian figures. The worlds of sport, music and film are saturated with women and men who incarnate either modernist or post-modernist perspectives. At the same time, fictional heroes and heroines share these predominantly secular beliefs. And so often “Christian” characters seem fuddyduddy, tame, and priggish! Young people desperately need to discover authentic, compelling and engaging role models that embody imaginatively their Christian beliefs – both in fiction and in real life. It is my belief that young people are turned off by “religion” as they call it (rather contemptuously), because they prefer the glamour and the excitement of their cultural icons and narratives to the dowdy image of the vicar proffering christenings, weddings, funerals and jumble sales. I will always remember the Year Seven girl who informed me one Tuesday that she did not want to take my subject (Religious Education) because she did not want to become a nun! There is something all Christians can learn from her answer as we ponder the world of the modern teenager.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Loaded*, September 1998, pp.80 – 81