

BRINGING YOUNG ADULTS BACK TO CHURCH

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Naomi Schaefer Riley, *Got Religion?: How Churches, Mosques and Synagogues Can Bring Young People Back* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2014)

Naomi Schaefer Riley, in her weekly columns in the *New York Post* as well as in several books she has authored, has emerged as an insightful commentator on a range of cultural issues impacting especially on marriage, family, and religious faith and practice – in the process, puncturing some of the myths about faith and family regularly perpetuated by America's cultural elite. And so when she authors a work exploring ways that the major religions might bring young adults back to active involvement in their faith, it commands notice.

In *Got Religion?*, Schaefer Riley focuses on specific – and highly varied – initiatives she has examined within six different faith traditions: a Presbyterian church in New Orleans; a Muslim young adult organization in California; a program designed to draw young Catholics into teaching in Catholic schools; an effort to encourage a permanent Jewish commitment among young people who have visited Israel through a philanthropic program; the Mormon church's creation of Young Single Adult (YSA) wards; and the efforts of one pastor to adapt his church to the changing role of black churches in today's African American communities.

Each of these approaches is instructive for us, as Catholics concerned with the challenge of bringing young adults and young families into greater participation in the life of the Church. In some instances, strategies undertaken in these particular faith communities offer new ideas that might be

worth trying; in other cases, they reflect things that may have already been tried in some form in our own Church, with varying degrees of success; and in still other cases, there are concerns raised by some of these strategies.

In her first chapter, Schaefer Riley, focusing on Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New Orleans, illustrates how the pastor has tapped into what seems to be the desire for physically tight, close-knit communities that she sees as driving the “reverse migration” of many millenials back into city life. Bucking the approach tried by faith communities – including our own – over several generations now, of special “programs” and separate groupings for young people – youth ministries, young adult ministries, etc. – this pastor strives to invite younger members into the full life of a unified congregation. In doing so, he is putting into action what we in the Catholic Church have always heard emphasized among youth and young adult leaders, but not always effectively implemented: that our young people are not just the Church of the future, they are an essential part of the Church of today.

One of the key components of involving young adults that Schaefer Riley finds in virtually every faith group she studied is a desire to be involved in service to others. But here, too, she identifies a different approach among millenials. Rather than getting involved in far-reaching “social justice” efforts (think globally, act locally, in baby boomer parlance), they seem to want to both think and act locally – focusing on, and addressing, the needs of their immediate neighbors, in the true spirit of community.

In a sense, that faith-based community spirit seems kind of a throwback to the bygone, pre-suburban era of the Catholic Church, when community life for Catholics in the cities centered on their parishes. My father-in-law always told us how, growing up in Brooklyn, when someone asked where you were from, you didn’t respond, “Bensonhurst” or “Canarsie”; you said “St. Dominic’s” or “Holy Family.” Your parish was your

community.

Can we ever go back to those times? With the secularization of modern society, probably not to the degree it was then. But what Redeemer Presbyterian seems to be demonstrating is that there are opportunities for churches, if they find the right approaches, to help fill the strong desire for community that millennials seem to be searching for in their return to city life.

In looking at a Jewish initiative called Birthright NEXT, Schaefer Riley touches on a challenge facing all religious communities – how to transform what she calls the “wow” moment of certain faith experiences into ongoing commitment to a faith community and, especially, to its rituals of worship and its permanent institutions.

Birthright NEXT, she explains, grew out of a philanthropic endeavor, Taglit-Birthright Israel (Taglit being Hebrew for “discovery”), that every year sends groups of young people on a ten day trip to Israel “to strengthen Jewish identity, Jewish communities, and solidarity with Israel.” Birthright NEXT, as the name suggests, is a response, Schaefer Riley explains, to the question of “What comes next?” after Jewish young people have had this “wow” experience. How can it be built upon to channel the enthusiasm of that event into a permanent commitment, not only to Jewish culture and community, but to the Jewish faith? We can see a parallel in the challenge for the Catholic Church to build upon the enthusiasm of millions of young people who have experienced World Youth Days. How can that spectacular faith experience be transformed into not only an ongoing faith life, but into active involvement in their parishes back home?

Birthright NEXT responds to this challenge by bringing Taglit-Birthright “alumni” together in reunion events that are not just social, but also involve religious observances; and—in an approach also evident in all of the other initiatives Schaefer

Riley explores in this book – giving them leadership roles in facilitating these gatherings, roles not always available to them in their established religious institutions. Besides thus giving young adults “ownership” in the practice of their faith, Schaefer Riley points out, this kind of “peer-to-peer” ministry may also make religious involvement more attractive to other young adults they are trying to reach out to.

This is not without its pitfalls – as Pastor DeForest Soaries of the First Baptist Church in Somerset, New Jersey, found when he tried to place some younger church members in leadership roles, in the process easing out some of the older, longtime leaders who came to see their positions as their “personal property.” We had a similar situation in my home diocese some years back, when our leaders endeavored to re-energize our college campus ministries by bringing in “peer ministers,” young adults fresh out of college whom it was thought could better relate to current college students. It caused a lot of controversy – including in our traditionally unfriendly secular media – over long-time, entrenched campus ministers who were being replaced. But a decade later, the new vibrancy in Catholic life on our secular college campuses is undeniable.

Other of Schaefer Riley’s observations do raise concerns; for example, the suggestion that Muslim institutions in America, whose older leadership tend to be immigrants, need to adjust to American culture– in order to appeal to their younger, American-born members – while at the same time, to be sure, holding on to their basic religious tenets. As we Catholics know, this is not easy in today’s secularized American culture, when our Church has been called upon to be a *countercultural* force. Too many American Catholics, rather than risk being socially ostracized, choose to follow the popular cultural trends, in the process rejecting the teachings of their faith. As the U.S. Bishops said in their 1999 document, “Living the Gospel of Life,” Catholics in

America have “been changed by the culture too much,” and “we have changed the culture not enough.”

My own judgment, based on years of research, writing, and involvement in many aspects of Catholic life in America, is that young people approach religion with the natural idealism of youth. This is what drives the desire, so prevalent among youth and young adults, as Schaefer Riley found in her research, to be involved in service to others. It is natural that they would be attracted to faith communities that offer them opportunities for “hands-on” work to assist those in need.

But it is my experience that the idealism of youth also inspires a desire for truth, and an attraction to religious institutions that are forthright in proclaiming the eternal truths in which they believe. Not, to be sure, in a condemnatory, fire and brimstone way; but in a positive, persuasive way that invites young people to fully understand what the Church teaches and why.

If, for example, we allow the secular culture to define Catholic teaching on marriage as nothing more than “homophobia,” our Church will not be attractive to young people looking for a religion of love. But if they have an opportunity to understand the natural law of God on which Church teaching is based, and the true essence of human love and sexuality as beautifully taught by Pope John Paul II in his Theology of the Body, Catholic youth truly looking for the truth will be drawn more deeply into the faith. Similarly, rather than allowing the secular culture to politicize Church teachings on abortion and contraception as a “war on women,” we need to show young people the truth that these teachings are founded in the same respect for the sanctity of human life that they find so attractive in the Church’s commitment to serving people in need.

And of course, we need to proclaim to young people – not only

by how we teach, but also by the example of our own reverence each week at Mass – our belief that the Eucharist, the center of our faith, is truly the body and blood of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Finally, some thought should be given to what we can learn from those young people who have *stayed* with the faith, who have not strayed or been “turned off” by a Church they feel has no place for them. For this I turned to my own primary sources: my daughter, 23 now, living and working in the Washington, D.C. area, and my son, just beginning his freshman year at Franciscan University of Steubenville. Both gave pretty much the same answer: a strong family faith life from their earliest years, nurtured and broadened by their experiences in a solidly Catholic high school (whose president, Marianist Father Philip Eichner, chairs the board of the Catholic League), in various youth-oriented faith activities (some in our parish, some that they found in other parts of Long Island), and of course at Franciscan University. These have given them those communities of young Catholic peers and opportunities for leadership so important to their growth in the faith. While parish life might not right now be the center of their faith lives, Mass and the Eucharist are. And I feel certain that in the future, as they marry and have children, their parishes and Catholic schools will become centers of their families’ faith involvement—into which, if invited, they will assume leadership roles.

So the challenge comes back again to how to involve more young families more fully in the life of the Church, so their children will have the foundation through which their faith will be either sustained through those challenging years of adolescence and young adulthood, or re-ignited later on. *Got Religion?* offers some ideas, in some dynamic faith communities, that might be helpful.

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