



BOOK REVIEW by The Rev'd John D. Alexander

Colleen Carroll

The New Faithful: Why Young Adults are Embracing Christian Orthodoxy

(Chicago: Loyola Press, 2002). 320 pages. \$19.95.

This book documents an often unnoticed and under-reported phenomenon among today's young Americans: a return to Christian orthodoxy. As author Colleen Carroll states her basic thesis: "Across the nation, from the runways of beauty pageants to the halls of Ivy League universities, a small but committed core of young Christians is intentionally embracing organized religion and traditional morality" (p. 4).

At the time of publication, Carroll was a twenty-seven year old news and editorial writer for the Saint Louis Post-Dispatch. In 2000 a Phillips Journalism Fellowship enabled her to spend a year traveling the country to conduct the research for this book. Written in the style of investigative journalism, the book is packed full of quotes and anecdotes from dozens of interviews with young Christians in a variety of careers, religious vocations, and academic settings. Although she is a Roman Catholic, Carroll has to her great credit written a book ecumenical in scope, documenting the return of young people not only to Roman Catholicism but also to Evangelicalism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and traditional Anglicanism.

Carroll focused her research on those born between 1965 and 1983, the so-called "baby busters" or "Generation X." She observes that their embrace of traditional religion and morality often begins with a search born of an inner craving for something other than a life lived for pleasure, success, or self. This craving often crystallizes into "a desire for beliefs that mean something, demand something, change something" (p. 29).

Young adults drawn to Christian orthodoxy often had little or no religious formation as children. Some were raised without any exposure to church. Others were raised in liberal churches that offered only a watered-down version of Christianity. One particularly scathing passage about her own Roman Catholic Church is worth quoting at length:

"If you want to make a Generation-X Catholic laugh, ask him about his childhood religious education. Odds are he will share at least one wacky story about his post-Vatican II formation in the faith. Interviews of young Catholics conducted for this book yielded too many anecdotes to recount, from stories of polyester-pantsuit-clad nuns spinning John Lennon records in high school religion classes to tales of agnostic confirmation instructors puffing on cigarettes while extolling existentialism to their teenage charges. One Catholic revert—who returned to the faith as an adult after an intense conversion experience—only recalls playing tag in his confirmation class. Another remembers spending his childhood CCD classes painting 'Jesus loves you' on rocks" (p. 66).

Such ignorance of the faith often engenders a hunger for solid answers. And unlike their baby boomer parents, these young Christians are not content merely to revel in the “spiritual search” as perpetual seekers.

The return to orthodoxy generally takes one of two forms. Many young adults are drawn to evangelical churches that combine contemporary worship and music with solid biblical preaching and teaching. Others are drawn to Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Anglicanism by precisely those elements that drove their baby boomer parents away: structure, liturgy, and tradition.

For those drawn to liturgical traditions, the primary cravings are for tough, time-tested teachings that make demands and require sacrifice and change, combined with worship imbued with mystery and a sense of the transcendent. In the Roman Catholic Church, traditional practices and devotions recently thought all but dead in the post-Vatican II era—such as Confession, the Rosary, Eucharistic adoration, and the Latin Mass—are now surging in popularity.

Yet, Carroll notes, young people drawn to such traditional forms of religion differ substantially from their grandparents even though their moral attitudes and devotional practices look remarkably similar. Their grandparents generally inherited their religious culture in a society that tacitly endorsed their Christian worldview. For today’s young Americans, by contrast, the embrace of orthodoxy is a profoundly counter-cultural move that cannot be made without serious critical reflection.

For this reason, perhaps, many of those embracing Christian orthodoxy are often what Carroll describes as cultural leaders: “young adults blessed with talent, intelligence, good looks, wealth, successful careers, impressive educational pedigrees, or charisma—or some dynamic combination thereof. They are the sort of people who, according to conventional wisdom, do not need religion ... They are the sort of people other young adults look to when considering what to do, how to live, and what to believe. So what they do, how they live, and what they believe matters to America—a lot” (p. 12).

Given the challenges of responding to the demands of orthodoxy in a pluralist culture, one of the characteristics of the new faithful is a quest for authentic, intimate communities that both offer support and demand accountability. Such communities may take the form of church-based fellowship groups, campus ministries, or even religious orders. The communities that are the most successful in attracting young adults are precisely those that make the greatest demands, grounding ministries of service to the world in disciplines of prayer and personal holiness. In the Roman Catholic Church, the religious orders experiencing the greatest success in recruiting new young members are precisely the more traditional and conservative orders.

The embrace of orthodoxy often entails a return to traditional morality in sexual matters. Where free love and casual sex were the new frontier for the sexual revolutionaries of the 1960’s and 70’s, for many of their children the novelty is a return to committed relationships, chastity, and modesty. Having experienced unhappiness and emptiness in a series of casual or failed sexual

relationships, many young adults find themselves captivated by the counter-cultural view of sexual morality articulated by traditional Christian theology.

Carroll devotes an especially interesting chapter to Christianity on campus. In the academic world, the once-prevalent assumptions of modernity—that progress is inevitable and that reason alone, not religious faith, leads to truth—have given way to the postmodern rejection of reason and embrace of relativism, the idea that there is no such thing as objective truth. Where religion was once seen as irrelevant to the quest for truth and moral absolutes, now neither truth nor moral absolutes are seen to exist at all. In this milieu, students are typically taught to tolerate each other's religious differences but not to commit the cardinal sin of thinking or speaking as though one's own beliefs or moral codes need apply to anyone else.

In this atmosphere, Carroll writes, the chances of Christian orthodoxy flourishing on campus might seem slim: “Orthodoxy opposes religious and moral relativism at every crucial point, insisting that its adherents accept as universal its rigorous moral standards and unflinching truth claims” (p. 159).

Yet, in recent years growing numbers of college students have been embracing orthodoxy. Evangelical fellowships such as InterVarsity and Campus Crusade for Christ have boomed in the past decade at secular universities. Meanwhile, enrollments are up at Christian colleges and universities, especially at the more conservative institutions where Christian convictions are woven into the curriculum and campus life.

In matters of politics, Carroll notes that today's young believers often reject the separation of sacred and secular that marks modern political thought. They insist on integrating their faith into every aspect of their lives, including their participation in the political process. Yet their orthodoxy often leads them to defy traditional political labels by simultaneously taking “conservative” stands on questions of sexual morality, marriage, and family, and “liberal” stands on social issues involving concern for the poor and oppressed. They tend not to make the same connections their parents did between liberal theology and social activism, or between traditional devotions and conservative politics. For example, the same principles that motivate a young Christian activist to oppose abortion may lead her also to oppose the death penalty or to lobby for affordable housing and health care for the poor, much to the puzzlement of her baby boomer parents. Religious principles thus take precedence over party allegiances; such young Christians are more interested in conforming their political ideology to Christianity than in forcing their Christianity into secular political categories.

Similarly, today's young Christians tend both to choose their careers carefully and to pay attention to how their faith informs their work. They are increasingly unwilling to check their faith at the office door. Many intentionally seek professions that give them the greatest leverage to exercise a Christian influence upon the culture. In the chapter entitled “The Call,” Carroll relates a number of stories of young Christians engaged in careers in business, finance, technology, law, medicine, mass media, publishing, the arts, and entertainment.

For young Christians living in a pluralist society, Carroll sees the chief challenge as one of striking the right balance between the twin threats of cultural isolation and assimilation. One

temptation is to maintain the integrity of one's religious commitments by retreating into a ghetto of like-minded believers shielded from the wider culture. The opposite temptation is to remain engaged with the wider culture at the cost of too many compromises of one's religious convictions. Carroll maintains that today's young Christians understand these dangers and are determined neither to opt out nor to sell out.

Carroll's upbeat conclusion is that orthodox Christianity is far from dead in America: "With conservative churches attracting committed Christians, liberal churches hemorrhaging members, and young believers working overtime to spread their faith, the future of orthodoxy in America looks bright" (p. 265).

Overall, I found this book frustrating in one respect and encouraging in another. For a study purporting to document a significant sociological trend, *The New Faithful* is long on anecdotes and short on hard quantitative analysis. Apart from citing a few Gallup polls here and there, Carroll makes no attempt to estimate even roughly what percentage of Generation X fits her profile of "the new faithful."

At the same time, however, I found *The New Faithful* encouraging because so much of what Carroll writes rings so true. Over the past ten years, it has been my privilege to know a good number of young people whose conversions and journeys towards Christian orthodoxy closely resemble the stories compiled in this book.

This book is essential reading for all concerned for the future of Christianity in America. Again and again, fellow clergy of the baby boomer generation admonish me that in order to attract young people, the Church must update itself by adopting contemporary language and music in its worship, and by embracing the pluralistic outlook of contemporary culture. Carroll's book suggests that such recommendations make the grievous mistake of projecting the attitudes of the young adults of twenty or thirty years ago upon the very different young adults of today. If Carroll is right, our traditional worship and orthodox teaching here at S. Stephen's may not be an obstacle to attracting intelligent young people, but our greatest advantage.