

# Theological Approaches to Adolescence

A look at spirituality  
adolescence  
and faith development

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## **THEOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO ADOLESCENCE - SPIRITUALITY, ADOLESCENCE AND FAITH DEVELOPMENT**

### **CLEARING SOME GROUND**

'Adolescence is at the same time a social construct, a psychological experience and a biological reality. This phase of human development is "defined by cultural practices and biological occurrences - a period by which behavioural abilities and expectations change" (1) All societies and cultures devise means of marking and handling the realities of human existence - Birth, Death, Procreation. The onset of puberty is one such. The transition from dependency as children to the maturity of full adulthood is a journey common to humankind. The forms this takes and the significance it is given vary.

Since the onset of the Industrial revolution and the growth of modern industrial states the need for an increasingly educated and trained workforce has steadily extended the period between childhood and adulthood. This has coincided in Western European countries, for which data is available, in the lowering of the median age for the onset of puberty at the rate " of about four months per decade since 1850 " i.e. from about sixteen and a half to about twelve and a half years (2) The effect of this is gradually to widen the disjunction between physical and social maturity particularly in the " developed " First World nations. When to this is added exclusion for large numbers from work and housing which help mark the transition to adult status in these and other rapidly industrialising and urbanising societies, the indeterminate period between childhood and adulthood is further increased. " Adolescence " in this sense is a modern phenomena.

Those who turn to the Bible to help in developing a theology of adolescence encounter several difficulties (3). Mark Aston and Phil Moon note (4) that for the young Jew there was a 'probationary period' between the ages of twelve and twenty. " For the Romans the period of adolescence began at seventeen and ended at thirty eight." They quote Arndt and Ginrich who suggest that the Greek term for 'youth' or 'young man' covers the period from the twenty fourth to the fortieth year (5). They conclude that whilst 'the ancient world knew nothing of the teenager' "God is God for all ages" (6). At no point in the human cycle is a person of less significance to God. "So we must not underestimate the spiritual experience and spiritual potential of the teenager" (7). Rather than seeking parallels between then and now a more fruitful use of the biblical record in seeking to develop theological approaches to adolescence lies in probing what is a biblical understanding of human-ness and seeking to relate this to our current understanding of adolescence.

### **WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HUMAN ?**

According to scripture human beings are spiritual beings created by God in His image (Gen 1:26) Spirituality is basic to personhood (John 4:11 & 12); God is Community, Father, Son and Spirit (2 Cor 13:14); God's love is experienced and expressed in relationships as is ours (1 John 4:11 & 12); Love requires choice and freedom to choose (I John 4:19-21); Choice implies the ability to choose both good and evil (Gen 3: 1-7)

Much follows from such an understanding.

Robert Warren in an excellent chapter 'Exploring the dynamic of being human'(8) concludes that "Full humanity.....is experienced when life is consciously received and enjoyed as gift and, thereby as relationship with the giver". He notes that the gifts of grace include 'creation, relationship, life and the Gospel' (9). These issue in celebration of the 'goodness of life, humanity, creation and all that is' (10).

Creativity arises in response to Grace and the desire to celebrate requires Community. John Stott, in a discussion on human rights, roots human dignity in our relationship to God (worship); our relationship to each other (fellowship); and our relationship to the earth

(stewardship) (11). “True freedom is found in being our true selves as authentic human beings not in contradicting ourselves” (12).

“Human spirituality” according to John Bradford “describes the well being and inter-relatedness of the emotional, cognitive and intuitive self which includes sensitivity to the transcendent” (13).

The human-ness we experience and enjoy in all its richness, which along with all creation God pronounced ‘good’ when first created, is exemplified in Jesus Messiah. He embodies what it is to be truly human. Through Him a new humanity has come into being.

But before we jump to the consummation of all creation we need to face squarely “the painful ambiguity which attaches to everything ‘human’ ”(14). Warren in a subsequent chapter tackles “the presence of evil and its impact on the whole created order (15). He roots this internally in the pride and unbelief which “reject the idea of humanity as a call to live as a creature before the Creator. Indeed they reveal that at the heart of this complex is a denial of the reality of God as the centre of existence and all that is, and the rejection of what it means to be human”(16). He goes on also to note the exteriority of evil “as a force that takes control of human existence and from which liberation is required”. “ Whilst this power is uncovered at the personal level in the ministry of Jesus, it is unmasked at the cultural and structural level by Paul in what he says about the principalities and powers”.

Walter Wink in his trilogy on the Powers explores these issues at depth (17). He coins the term “Domination System” which has “become the object of God’s wrath and redemptive activity” (18). It is this which seeks to deny and destroy the created order and humanity with it. Warren characterises evil as

**idolatry** - “When we grasp the gifts of life for ourselves - rather than see them as the gifts of a generous Giver, we turn them into ends rather than means to a higher end” (19).

**addiction** - by which we turn the “capacity to enjoy all things into a need to possess them” (20)

**domination** - by which the distortion of our gift of creativity “shows up as the drive to dominate and control others and the whole of creation” (21)

**alienation** - “when it comes to our being made in the likeness of God, to be social beings, the destructive nature of evil manifests itself as the gravity which causes us to be pulled into the negative” (22)

Fallen humanity’s propensity for evil by choice and by subjection to the dark powers finds its restoration in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. “Salvation is, essentially considered, the restoration of humanity to mankind” (23).

From this perspective any period of life is one during which human beings explore and seek to understand their God given nature including their capacities for good and evil. It is therefore in regard to the distinctive characteristics of young people by which this general experience is shaped that we should attempt to develop theological approaches to adolescence.

## **UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENCE**

There is now formidable and extensive literature on Adolescence. Six hundred and nineteen sources are quoted in the second edition of ‘The Nature of Adolescence’ by John Coleman and Leo Hendry which surveys a wide range of publications, articles and research findings. They note two earlier approaches to the understanding of adolescence under the categories of psychoanalytic theories and sociological theory. The first takes “as its starting point the upsurge of instincts which is said to occur as the result of puberty” (24). However, “for the sociologist and social psychologist ‘socialisation’ and ‘role ‘ are the two key concepts (25) .

They go on to outline recent approaches beyond these two viz. “Lifespan developmental psychology” (26) which has four key assumptions:

- # There is a human ecology or context for human development
- # Individuals and their families reciprocally influence each other
- # Individuals are products of their own development
- # A multi disciplinary approach must be taken to studying human development

This is critiqued later (27) as not being able to resolve the ‘stress’ and ‘strain’ debate. They point out that many theories of adolescence arise from studies of dysfunctional young people and those who belong to minority or deviant groups. A majority of young people manage the transition of adolescence pretty well. But the life span approach is applicable to any age so what is distinctive about the generality of young people ? Here they outline and examine critically the ‘focal’ theory (28) which seeks to map a series of over-lapping foci characterising adolescent experience e.g. growth spurt and the onset of puberty, which are dealt with one at a time. Others argue adolescent experience comes in clusters and seek to develop integrated models (29) which links political and economical factors, institutional factors, individual factors, group factors, regional factors, with class, patriarchy and time.

Perhaps the search for general theories are doomed to failure. Most studies are descriptive of what is.

The ‘Whys’ are in short supply and subject to “ Yes, but.....!” It may therefore be better to work with descriptions that seem to fit the generality of the young e.g.

From ‘Adolescence and Youth in Perspective’ edited by John Hill and Fran Monks categorises the changes which occur over the adolescent period as;

- Primary**      Biological - Growth spurts, secondary sexual characteristics  
                    Physical, emotional (hormonal). psychological  
                    Cognitive - kinds of thinking; what ? why ?  
                    Social - home and family; school/college/teachers;  
                    Peer group - sub cultures
  
- Secondary**    Detachment and autonomy  
                    Sexuality and intimacy  
                    Achievement - skills/gifts; roles; vocation/job  
                    Identity formation

In ‘Identity - Youth and Crisis’ for Erickson, adolescence is a period within which a series of related matters need to be resolved for individuals to reach integrated maturity viz.

- # develop a time perspective
- # acquire self certainty
- # experiment with new roles
- # anticipate achievement
- # acquire sexual identity
- # balance leadership with response to authority
- # identify personal ideals

Fleming in ‘Adolescence - its Social Psychology looks at;  
the adolescent at home  
the adolescent at school  
the adolescent on the threshold of maturity

If these cross currents (30) are those which individuals navigate at this phase of his or her life’s journey by what yardstick, if any, are judgements to be made as to how well each is doing and to what understanding of maturity is each bound ? Who or what decides the norms?

## TOWARDS A SYNTHESIS

It is at this point that biblical perspectives and the socio-psychological ones interact. A helpful biblical paradigm is Shalom. “This beautiful Hebrew word has no adequate equivalent in English. It comes from a verb ‘to make whole’, ‘to bring to inter related fulfilment’. It means for the individual a totally integrated life with health of body, heart and mind, attuned to nature, open to others, in joy with God. Between persons it means sharing, mutuality and love; in community or society it means justice and dignity and inter-dependence and freedom, harmony and reciprocity, the contentment with ‘enough’ that all may have ‘enough’; it is the opposite of repression, violence and selfishness; it means man as a caring trustee of creation having ended exploitation, indifference and irresponsibility. This is something of the vision of the Shalom of God ‘which passes all understanding’, the total well being he wills for man and the cosmos, the goal of His mission the content of His reign” (31).

The vision of humanity thus restored in Christ both illuminates the path and provides a wholeness to which to aspire. In this regard John Bradford’s book ‘Caring for the Whole Child’ charts a promising course (32) . He sub titles it ‘A Holistic Approach to Spirituality’ and it is published on behalf of the Christian Child Care Network by the Children’s Society. He sets out a ‘tripartite concept, the three parts of which - human, devotional and practical - fit closely together and complement the whole. It is a concept which is totally multi-cultural and multi-faith in its application. “.....There is a very real need to work with children and young people in a way which promotes their general well being and development which is inclusive of the ‘devotional’ or religious dimension” (32).

For Bradford, ‘Human Spirituality’, as noted earlier, “describes the well being and inter-relatedness of the emotional, cognitive and intuitive self, which includes sensitivity to the transcendent(33).

“**Devotional** spirituality refers to the formation of a corporate and personal religious life”(34)

“**Practical** spirituality describes signs of the integration of human and devotional spirituality in everyday living”.

It refers to vital principles, frame of mind and activating emotions as they engage and participate in life(35). Whole persons require a whole spirituality for wholesome lives.

In life where on earth is this to be found ? As the ‘avant garde’ of the new creation (Rom 1;19) Christ’s second body on earth is called to point the way. “The church should be the one community in the world in which human dignity and equality are invariably recognised and human responsibility for each other accepted; the rights of others are sought and never violated, while our own are often renounced; there is no partiality, favouritism or discrimination; the poor and weak are defended and human beings are free to be human as God made us and meant us to be”(36).

In as far as the Christ Community fails to exemplify truly redeemed humanness the young are denied working models of the new humanity to which all are called. Theology and missiology meet here or not at all.

## SOME CONCLUSIONS

From this brief sketch several conclusions can be drawn.

Whilst theology informs and engages with the predominant concerns of adolescence - issues of identity, meaning and purpose - theological understandings of adolescence is in principle different from that of human beings at other phases of life.

‘Youth A Part’ makes this comment;

“There has been a blurring between the chronological adolescence of youth and the psychological adolescence of much adult culture. Chronological adolescence is a time of

transition, exploration and formation of identity. Paradoxically it may only be the young who can help the church to find appropriate new forms of adult discipleship. In any case youth work will not be able to address the identity crisis of adolescence apart from the identity crisis in society as a whole”(37).

Who is developing such theologies and for what purpose ? This seems to be an enterprise largely undertaken by and for those working with young people. These are largely theologies of youth work (38). They provide frameworks of understanding which inform purpose, aims, goals and ways of working.

Theologies of youth work connect with theological approaches to adolescence when youth work is understood as concerned with personal development. “The church’s ministry in education and personal development is founded in its understanding of Christ. Christ is the model for maturity” (39).

“Ultimately a Christian concern for young people’s self identity and personal growth has to be related to the truthfulness or otherwise of the stories they believe about themselves and the truth of the Story of God revealed in Christ. If Christ is the measure of mature humanity, then the church is called to help young people to relate their own stories within the liberating story of Christ (40).

Incarnational youth work centred in relationships takes seriously the experiences of adolescence. “Youth work is also based on incarnation; entering into the young person’s world, treating it with discerning respect rather than suspicion, sharing their joys and sorrows; genuinely engaging with their questions whilst bringing the challenge of Christian discipleship to them” (41).

Our understanding of Spiritual has to be released from the confines of religion.

*“ A clear picture has emerged showing the spiritual awareness of non church young people. They are active in making sense of themselves, the world and the existential questions they encounter. They are recipients of the most profound religious experiences, comparable with any reported by church attenders. Finally they make sense of their lives through a faith which is constructed by centres of value and power creating an ultimate environment” (42).*

*“ ....because young people do not associate spiritual experiences with the words ‘awe’ and ‘wonder’ does not mean that these experiences are absent” (43).*

Thinking theologically about and with young people provides the means by which ‘this’ which is experienced can be named as ‘that’ to which their humanity in Christ is called and to which they can respond.

If young people are to relate their own personal stories to that of Jesus Messiah and make sense of their own in relation to His then we should involve young people in their own theological enterprise. Such theologies of adolescence are developed from within the life worlds of the young as they know them and experience them. This is theology from the inside rather than from without. Such doing theology (44) operates as a spiral process.



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