

# Some thoughts on the Teaching of Christianity to Young Adults in the Twenty-first century

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First of all, I want to thank the Company of Mary for asking me for my thoughts about teaching young people in the twenty-first century. I am honored and humbled by the invitation. I doubt I can contribute much to a group who has been a leader in education for four hundred years. I will, however, do my best to offer what insights I have gathered in my nearly thirty years of teaching undergraduate university students.



I must immediately add that those insights are limited by my social and educational location. I have been teaching in the same institution, the University of San Diego, for nearly my entire teaching career. That means that the students with which I am familiar are somewhat homogeneous. The University of San Diego is an independent Catholic school that attracts mainly wealthy Anglo students from the southwest of the United States. The vast majority are between eighteen and twenty-one years of age. The University of San Diego has a very small percentage of students who are older. Even though we are a Catholic school, over forty per cent of students are not Catholic. Many are not Christian and very many, whether Christian or non-Christian, have little or no experience of religious practice. This means that they may not be a typical group even for the youth of the United States. I should add that I am not only a theologian but also an historian, so my understanding of Christianity is very much influenced by an historian's bent. We tend to look at Christianity as it developed over centuries rather than how it happens to be at the moment.

As a University professor, I am not involved directly in the personal life of the students. I do not do counseling, as might, for instance someone in campus ministry. Unlike some of my colleagues, I quite deliberately avoid personal topics with the students. I am not trained as a counselor and I feel that it would be unfair for them to think that I can handle their personal problems. This means that my discussion here will have more to do with how to teach Christianity rather than how to foster the spiritual development of students or how to deepen their faith. Of course, understanding Christianity might well deepen their faith and, in fact, offer them the possibility of a more mature and richer understanding of their own faith life.

Given these warning, I will proceed to describe the student body with which I work, the world which they seem to inhabit, and how I feel they might best be engaged with the good news of Jesus' message.

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The world of youth is well described in Challenges in the Educational Mission of the Company of Mary Our Lady and so I apologize in advance if my comments seem to be redundant.

1. The world in which the students live is strongly influenced by **postmodernism**. In this case, this overused word means that the students tend to understand the world as relative. Ethics, religion, even reality itself is seen as “constructed” and “chosen”. Many students will assume that particularly religious and ethical choices are relative. While one can offer reasons for such choices, no reasons are really “better” than others and that all beliefs are equally to be respected. Unlike science, which they see as established by experiment and reason, religion and ethics are almost infinitely malleable. This assumption is closely related to the next attribute of the students’ world.

2. Students live in a world shaped by **consumerism**. They rarely even question their role as consumers. They understand religion, ethics, politics, in short, everything but perhaps science, as a product. Since different brands of products (religions, ethical theories, political parties, etc.) are on offer, they are free to choose which brand (if any) best fits their needs. In this context, they are more likely to ask how God fits into their world rather than how they might fit into God’s world. Consumerism also entails understanding of society as competitive. A person consumes in order to demonstrate their superiority over other people. Built into consumerism is the notion that one is inadequate; one must constantly try to live up to the impossible images produced to entice people to buy more and more. This is particularly difficult on young women since the image that a consumer society presents of the ideal woman is impossible for them to attain. This means the students live in constant fear of failure or humiliation.

3. A great many of my students are also affected strongly by **individualism**. I have to qualify this statement somewhat because particularly the Latino/a students that I work with have much stronger sense of community than the Anglo students. In fact the Latino/a students would place family and community above their individual needs and that sometimes places them at a disadvantage at the University. However given this qualification, I would suggest that there is societal pressure on both Anglo students and Latino/a students is to see the world through the lens of individualism. This means they often tend to understand salvation, if they have a concept of salvation at all, as formed by an individual relationship with God or, if Christian, by a personal relationship with Jesus. They do not see any inherent connection between salvation and the greater welfare of the community.

4. The students also lived in a world strongly affected by **technology**. For many students in the developed world, the “ virtual ” world may seem more real than the actual world. The students spend many more hours on the computer or watching television than they do interacting with real people in real situations. I really don't know all the implications of this, but I would suggest at least that students might tend to see the world as entertainment. They

almost automatically feel themselves to be spectators, rather than participants, in the world. Through the use of cell phones, the internet and e-mail, students can be in touch with people and places all over the world. However, they experience these places and these people as removed from them. They can watch them and communicate with them and at their own pleasure, but the reverse is not true. It is an experience that is completely under their control of the spectator. The world is seen and heard but not engaged.

5. The students are also aware of and shaped by **globalization**. As mentioned above technology makes it possible for them to see and even correspond with people all over the world. Through the media, they see images of cultures very different from their own. They are also aware that many of the products that they buy are manufactured, or their raw ingredients produced, in many parts of the world.

Each of these aspects of the world as experienced by at least the students that I have met in my years of teaching is both a challenge and opportunity.

1. The **challenge** posed by a half **postmodernism** is the inherent relativism that the students have imbibed from the culture around them. Some small numbers of students react to this relativism by adopting a "fundamentalist" mentality towards the world. If one cannot reasonably assess different life choices, then it is simpler to adopt a position based on faith alone. Faced with complexities of many different competing claims, some students accept the claims of different forms of fundamentalism as a bulwark against what they perceive as chaos. Students who adopt this stance can be frightened if it is suggested to them that their accepted religious stance is mistaken. Great care must be taken with such students to respect their position while also offering them a safe way to move into a more open and accepting worldview. Other students, even a smaller number in my experience, react to postmodernism by rejecting all claims to truth and adopting a cynical and selfish attitude towards life.

The **opportunity** offered by **postmodernism** is openness to the world and to other cultures. The challenge is to get students to understand that there may be more than one acceptable way of life and worldview. Further students need to be introduced to Christianity as one of several attractive and coherent ways of life, a way of life that respects diversity. Students need to be taught that the tradition of Christianity is one of diversity from its earliest days. Christianity developed not only in Roman Empire but also Persian Empire, Ethiopia, India, Numidia and Armenia. Each of these traditions interprets the message of Jesus in its own distinctive ways. Despite the tendency towards fundamentalism or cynicism on the part of a minority of students, most students react very favorably to the notion that Christianity is a way of life that is accepting of other ways of life. Since Roman Catholicism, as opposed to some forms of evangelical Christianity, has a history of openness to other cultures and even other religions, students often find Catholicism an exciting form of Christianity. When students are presented with this way of life, rather than dogmatic or institutional assertions, they seem to respond quite eagerly. Here is a great opportunity of postmodernism. Students who live in a multi-cultural world can

understand a Christianity that is accepting of such a world, and that presents a viable way of existing in that world but does not automatically condemn other ways of life.

2. The **challenges** presented by **consumerism** are more daunting. It is difficult to get the students to see the world in terms other than those presented by consumerism since that approach to the world is so dominant in the media that takes up so much of their time. Efforts to confront consumerism and replace it with some alternative are doomed to fail in my opinion. For better or for worse, consumerism dominates the developed world. The challenge will be to transform consumerism rather than to replace it.

Here the optimism and idealism of the youth can be a great **opportunity**. Students can see through the selfishness embodied in consumerism and wish to be taught ways of combating it. Students are not likely to abandon the notion that one chooses a particular religion or lifestyle just as one chooses toothpaste, but they can be taught that some religions and lifestyles are more life-enhancing and more intellectually coherent than others. In my experience, students respond eagerly to the suggestion that Christianity offers just such a life-affirming and joyful alternative. Of course, the Christianity presented to youth must be one that is joyful and life affirming. This joy and affirmation should also be apparent in the life of the teacher, or the natural suspicion of youth will be immediately aroused. This, of course, also offers them a vision of the world that is not competitive and does not demand an impossible ideal to attain. This can be very attractive to young adults who are sometimes desperate for acceptance and even forgiveness.

Another **opportunity** offered by **consumerism** comes from the growing alternative economy. The natural optimism and idealism of students seems to attract them to the alternative economy. Most students I teach would rather work for a company that is socially responsible. They would rather buy products that are produced in a socially responsible way. Students however need to be taught about this economy and be presented with the opportunities to participate in it. They need to see how successful an economy that helps people can be. Periodicals like *Ode* offer an optimistic and positive presentation of alternative economies. Since part of the agenda of the alternative economy is to reject the untenable stereotypes of women (and men) presented by the mainstream economy, women in particular are drawn to participate in this more human approach to the distribution of good and services. In my experience, students react very unfavorably to a consistently critical stance. They are searching for practical solutions to problems. The constantly negative criticism of both the political left and the political right leaves them unmoved. They're not dogmatists; they're pragmatists. If they understand Christianity as part of the solution to the problems raised by consumerism they will respond much more positively than they will to any suggestion that Christianity is completely opposed to consumerism. They must be given an opportunity to see that they can participate in the world as it is and still be Christians working to make it an even better world. They want to feel good about themselves (don't we all?) and the alternative economy gives them this possibility while yet living in world as it is.

3. The **challenge of individualism** is quite straightforward. Students need to understand that their lives are ineffably enmeshed with those of others. They need to understand that they have responsibility to others as a community and in a community. Finally, they need to be presented with the Christianity that understands salvation as a community endeavor.

The great **opportunity** presented by the **individualism** of our society resides in the great longing of youth for community. Because of the breakdown of the family and because of the great mobility of families in the United States, most of the young people that I have encountered are searching, almost desperately, for community. Here Roman Catholicism offers a very attractive understanding of Christianity as corporate. The concept of the Mystical Body of Christ, a community that encompasses both the living and the dead, finds a ready audience in the youth that I have encountered. They have been very excited by the fact that they are part of a larger whole; that they are important members of the community that is working to make the world a better place. Particularly effective in this regard is the involvement of youth in social action programs. Despite the individualistic society in which they were raised, most students I know are very eager to participate in community projects. This gives them a sense of belonging that they do not get it from society or even from their families. It is absolutely essential to this endeavor, however, that young people be treated as colleagues and equals in these undertakings. If younger adults are treated as adults, they're much more likely to take their responsibilities seriously. This is also the most important way in which they can gain their own sense of self-respect and thereby understand themselves as responsible members of the community. Any attempt to treat them as children or some kind of second-class citizen will be counterproductive. To understand what a community is they must be allowed to seriously undertake the responsibilities of a member of that community. Like the rest of us, they must learn responsibilities by sometimes failing at them. This will teach them the extremely important Christian concept of forgiveness of both self and of others. Sometimes Christian educators make a mistake of treating young adults like children long after they're really adults. This reinforces this selfishness which individualism can cause by removing from them responsibility for their own actions within the community. They will also learn that they are saved by the love and forgiveness of other for them and of themselves for others.

4. The **challenge of technology** is its mastery. Students are much more likely to be masters of the latest technology than their older teachers. Yet, they are so used to this technology that they will expect it to be used in their teaching. Further, teachers need to help students to use this technology critically. The Internet, for example, offers both good and bad indiscriminately. Students need to be able to differentiate between the two. This will require some effort on the part of especially older teachers to stay up-to-date with technology.

The **opportunities of technology** are twofold. First, modern technology opens up to students the entire universe. Ideas, Images and worldviews that would have been inaccessible to the average student even twenty years ago, are now just a click away on the Internet. Students can quickly gain an understanding

of the world as a large committee in a way that has never been possible before in history. Perhaps we really are moving towards “world solidarity” for the first time. If the students understand Christianity as a religion that accepts diversity, then they will see the value of Christianity as a lifestyle that will enhance this movement towards a global community. Second, since the students know more about technology than their teachers, this can be an opportunity for the students to act as teachers. This can be a tremendously liberating experience for the students. They find themselves accepted as valued members of the community. They also feel their responsibilities within that community since the teacher depends on them for their technological expertise. This can be a wonderful experience for all concerned.

5. The **challenge of globalization** entails the analysis that must accompany it. Students need to realize that globalization can sometimes in fact often entail the exploitation of the poor at the expense of the rich. If one is teaching the rich, it can be counterproductive to condemn them and their lifestyle. What the students want to know is how they, as rich can act justly and thus be saved. Far too often, they feel, and unfortunately are, dismissed or condemned in proclaiming solidarity with the poor. If one is teaching the poor, if the challenge is empower them, to teach them to see their value as human beings. Further, the poor need to be able to analyze the system of globalization to understand how it works to their disadvantage and, most importantly, to see how they can be empowered to change that system.

The **opportunity of globalization** resides in its ability to offer both rich and poor the possibility of mutual understanding and mutual aid. As suggested above if the students are given practical examples of how they can contribute to making the world a better place they will be eager to participate. Further, if they understand Christianity as a religion which is accepting of rich and poor, without denying Christianity's clear preferential option for the poor, they will understand themselves as part of a community working to make the world a better place for everyone. Given the possibilities afforded by technology as described above, the very best opportunity for both rich and for to collaborate is for them to meet. If they understand each other as human beings, or better yet as fellow Christians, they will be more likely to realize that each has their own strength and contribution to make in bringing about the kingdom of God. There is no substitute in bringing about conversion than actually working with people of other cultures and social economic status.

In short, young adults need to feel accepted despite their faults, empowered despite their weakness and challenged to be the people they know they should be, as do we all. If they understand Christianity, and more particularly, Roman Catholicism, as a way of life that so accepts, empowers and challenges them, they will be eager to learn more about the message of Jesus.

I hope these thoughts are helpful in your deliberations and once again I thank you for this opportunity to share my experiences with you. My prayers and thoughts are with you in this important time in your long and distinguished history.