

Generation to generation: What's up with the kids?

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Since Ernest Hemingway famously quoted Gertrude Stein in the 1920s, “You are a lost generation,” Americans have been fascinated by the idea of generational difference. Characterizing an entire generation involves a mammoth generalization, of course, and the generalizations are as likely to be resented as embraced by members of the cohort in question. “Generation X was created by some over-40 writer,” grumbles Bryant Adkins, expressing a frequent complaint of Gen Xers. Actually, the term Generation X was created by an under-30 writer named Douglas Coupland, though he was himself suspicious of such labels. With an acute awareness of his elders’ commercial designs (a characteristic of his generation?), he headed one chapter of his book *Generation X* with the words “I am not a target market.”

Marketing does have a lot to do with generational consciousness. Tastes in clothes and music are obvious markers of difference, and marketing firms are quick to pounce on opportunities for new products and for new ways to sell the old products. Advertisers have already trained their eyes on Generation Y, those born between 1979 and 1994, whose tastes have begun to shape the marketplace. (The politics of Generation Y may be glimpsed for the first time in the November 7 elections.) Estimated at 60 million, Generation Y, also dubbed the “millennium generation” or the “echo generation,” is three times the size of Generation X (whose members were born between ’64 and ’78) and nearly the size of the massive Baby Boom generation (’48 to ’64). No doubt we can look forward to many advertising campaigns (and sociological studies and D.Min. theses) based on the cultural style of Generation Y.

Still, however grandiose or suspect generalizations may be, generational analysis remains plausible because we all have intimate experiences of generational tensions. We know that children often flee from what their parents embraced, or embrace what their parents fled. In the religious realm, we know that people who grow up in tightly knit, homogeneous religious communities are often the ones who are most open to new formulations of faith (either because they are fleeing their

narrow origins or, having enjoyed the security of a solid religious community, they feel free to explore others). Conversely, newcomers to faith are often the most rigid defenders of tradition—they are the ones most grateful for the structure. In this vein, Lauren Winner observes that Gen Xers' experience of religious rootlessness may make them more appreciative of religious tradition.

Perhaps the only thing that can be said for sure is that the transmitting of faith and values from one generation to another is always complex, full of paradoxes and ironies, fear and trembling. It is never automatic. If it were, it wouldn't be faith.