The New Faithful, by Collen Carroll

reviewed by Jennifer E. Copeland in the March 22, 2003 issue

The day before Congress voted to support George W. Bush's "use of force" in Iraq a young man stood at the center of the Duke University campus near the end of an hour-long peace rally and announced, "I am a Christian. I am against this war." Many others in the 60 minutes preceding his statement had offered sound political, social and economic arguments against war, and all of us had participated in the rally cries of "No blood for oil." But no one else had claimed faith as the driving force for anti-war sentiment. The young man reminded us that Jesus said, "Quit fighting," and himself did exactly that. In this young man's opinion, that truth alone is reason enough for Christians to oppose war.

Young people willing to stake their reputations on the truth of the gospel provide the subject matter for Colleen Carroll's book. At no time does Carroll use the term "orthodox" to refer to the Orthodox Church, but members of that faith tradition are certainly sheltered under her umbrella. Her self-proclaimed purpose for writing the book is to chronicle the stories of young people whose lives are shaped by the decision to embrace the moral roots of orthodox Christianity. Carroll herself is a young Roman Catholic who identifies with the "orthodoxy" she describes.

I delighted in the resurgence of conventional faith practices recorded in Carroll's first chapters, such as regular participation in the Eucharist, defense of ecclesiastical authority, and sustained prayer lives. She also heralds the newfound appreciation among young adults for a liturgical tradition that many of us have consistently embraced.

The definition of orthodoxy, however, becomes narrower as the book proceeds. I began to worry that Carroll's examples of orthodoxy were often synonymous with conservatism--theological, political and social. My suspicion was confirmed before I reached the last chapter. One could argue, of course, that I am one of those whom Carroll describes as "liberal baby boomers." Since I also own a copy of John Shelby Spong's *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*, cited by Carroll as a boomer talisman, my credibility as a critic of her book may be evaporating.

The new faithful, as described by Carroll, disdain "the old, tired, liberal, modern mind-set." If, as Carroll claims, earlier generations abandoned tradition and scripture for the sake of radical activism, let this subsequent generation in their haste to embrace tradition and scripture not abandon the radical activist witness of Christ set forth in the very scriptures they are now, thankfully, reading once again.

Using polarizing labels, such as liberal and conservative, does little to further the discussion, and neither does using a term like orthodoxy--already laden with complicated religious nuances. For instance, the young man mentioned in the opening paragraph would certainly describe himself as a faithful Christian, yet he might fail many of the litmus tests used by Carroll to catalogue her book's "orthodox" subjects.

Some of the core beliefs she mentions include rejecting gay rights, practicing courtship rituals that dictate the man must take the lead, home schooling, social conservatism, and a preponderance of masculine images for God. Carroll's new faithful are routinely described as beaming beauty queens with dimpled cheeks and reams of curls, pretty and pearl-clad, slim and bubbly, tall and handsome or Tom Cruise look-alikes. All of which leads me to wonder: Are there any homely Christians? In a society saturated by concern with body image, which often produces negative self-esteem, why does this book pay so much attention to physical appearance?

Another oft-cited quality of these new faithful is talent. Yet we know that the gospel did not spread because Jesus had talented disciples--read Mark. Finally, much is made of the notion that these beautiful and talented people are soon to be, if they are not already, in positions of influence and power. Those who are not yet there are jockeying for positions from which they can "transform the culture for Christ." Following this line of reasoning, we should conclude that having a Christian president would solve all our problems. After all, the president of the United States is the most powerful person in the world.

As for the book's broader theme, Carroll makes some sweeping generalizations about mainline Protestantism, generalizations that support her thesis but are not entirely accurate. For instance, to claim that the defection of 20 Campus Crusade leaders to the Eastern Orthodox Church marked a "wave of conversions of Protestants disaffected by the liberalism of mainline churches" is erroneous on two counts. First, 20 people is not a wave.

More important, members of Campus Crusade would rarely describe themselves as either liberal or mainline. They are unmistakably conservative and evangelical, so their conversion to Eastern Orthodoxy, no matter how large, cannot indicate disaffection with the liberalism of mainline churches. It may indicate disaffection of some sort, but not the sort claimed by Carroll. And there may be disaffection in the mainline churches, but it cannot be explained by charting the behavior of Campus Crusade leaders.

While Carroll interviews a young woman living in a Catholic Worker House and mentions a protest rally at the School of the Americas, the preponderance of conservative themes throughout the book occludes a much richer tapestry of faith practices and faith systems among young adults.

Carroll betrays the limited appeal of this "new faith" with statements such as "the movement toward orthodoxy may make up in talent, zeal and personal influence what it lacks in raw numbers and popular support." In fact, there are multitudes of ways that young adults seek meaning and direction for their lives and a plethora of religious traditions from which to chose. Self-centeredness continues to claim victims; however, my encounters with the generation highlighted in Carroll's book have revealed individuals refreshingly aware of life's good gifts.

In recognizing these gifts and God, their giver, they in turn raise questions of personal responsibility and search actively for ways to express their gratitude. Christianity has always bred such gratitude, most often expressed through volunteer efforts. More and more, I encounter young adults who want to give back something of the gifts they have received, not because they are privileged and able but because they are blessed and called to do so.