

GENX RELIGION. Ed. Richard W. Flory and Donald E. Miller
Routledge, New York, 2000. Pp. viii+ 257, £50 hbk, £13.99 pbk.

This is a highly stimulating and original collection of 11 essays on the strategies for spiritual survival of a generation of seekers after salvation under 30 years of age. Termed 'religious dabblers', they represent the spiritually disenfranchised of California. The ethnographies in the study exhibit a diversity of approaches to worship that reach out to the lonely and the spiritually broken of a generation that has seemingly abandoned all religious quests. The study is a highly revisionist account of how the needs of an unexpectedly spiritually thirsty generation are being met. Demanding forms of Christianity, biblically based, and taken very literally in some cases, seem to work best. The collection contains some exceptionally good ethnography that admirably conveys a sense of place, particularly useful given the unexpected locations used, that range from night clubs, tattoo parlours, to school gyms, etc. Evangelical styles of direct engagement dominate this spiritual supermarket where people pick and chose their communal affiliations. From some highly improbable raw material, conversions are made and lives are healed. Uniquely, in a sociological work, life at the coal face of Christianity is given a decent and understanding ethnography by all the contributors who operate very much as advocates for their spiritual tribes.

GenerationX refers to the unknown beliefs of Americans born between 1961 and 1981, those saddled with not having got wet in the watershed of 1968. A generation marked by apathy, nihilism and cynicism, they sit around a tombstone whose engraving reads 'killed by postmodernity'. Suggesting that they are not without hope, this collection follows two earlier well known studies in this area: Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* (1998); and Wade Clark Roof, *A Generation of Seekers: The Spiritual Journeys of the Baby Boom Generation* (1993).

Two well known sociologists edited and guided the project. They drew out some excellent contributions from a number of postgraduates. These contribute towards a sense of vividness and engagement that makes this collection no dry boring piece of sociological work. It has an immediacy and sense of testimony that conveys well the stories and narratives to be told. The ethnographies are up-beat, theologically uncritical, but reflect well the authenticity of struggle of some unexpected individuals desperately seeking God. The collection suffers slightly from being too expositional in parts. It does owe a lot to the Vineyard approach to evangelisation which is somewhat uncritically treated as the paradigm for these new churches.

The styles of worship chronicled in this collection do seem to avoid the cult-like properties attached to the 'Nine O'Clock Service' in

Sheffield where Anglicans seeking experimental forms got their fingers burnt. Somehow, these Californian services 'work' in connecting to the rootless and the spiritually damaged. As one Xer in the study says "we" are all we have" (p.244). Flory indicates that these ethnographies show a distinct concern with the visual, with images in the styles of worship geared to cultivate a direct sense of contact with the spiritual. The culture of a generation seems fittingly represented in its entrepreneurial eclectic liturgical modes. These express a sense of embodiment, of sensation and mutual contact geared to the needs of the lonely and the isolated, who desperately need communal solace and a sense of being loved.

All the chapters are wonderfully titled and are highly readable. Two notable essays appear in the first section devoted to 'Spirituality Embodied': 'Marked for Jesus: Sacred Tattooing among Evangelical GenXers'; and 'Spirituality Bites:Xers and the Gothic Cult/ure'. Tattooing is treated as a form of witness to group commitment, a sort of sacramental sign without the comforts. Those so marked treat it as a spiritual statement. Chapter 2 on the Gothic, captures well the darkness, the seeking of feelings of melancholy in manufactured identities whose collectivity is often realised through the Internet. For its adherents, the need to 'feel' Gothic is paramount.

The other chapters draw in some excellent material. For instance, the church in the nightclub, in chapter 3, places a high premium on democratising the sacred. Like other assemblies described in the collection, there are few estranging props of the sacred in its ministries and styles of worship. Chapter 4, on Evangelical youth culture and Latinos captures again the way communities are formed in terms of affinity, where the broken come together. Chapter 7 on an evangelical initiative that started in a surf shop is exceptionally good. All contributions capture well the rawness of GenerX who make their religious forms pragmatically in their own cultural image and likeness, where real demands are made in the search for 'real' new time religion.

Weber's notion of elective affinity haunts this perceptive of a rootless, unloved, unstructured generation seeking solace. One might not agree with the liturgical and theological strategies described, yet they do meet real needs and circumstances. Overall, this a study with a wealth of material to ponder on, not so much to replicate in Catholicism, but to think how it can re-cast its moorings, perhaps through a radical re-invention of its traditions, so misguidedly abandoned to uncertainties in the past three decades. This collection shows how spiritual damage might be reversed, and that is *the* gift of faith all believers seek to use, however unpropitious the cultural circumstances of rooting.

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