

Youth and Religion Project

Module 7

Two Young United Methodists Speak About Their Religion and Their Parents (telling us a lot more than they may know about generation gaps)

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Two of the participants in a Y&RP focus group of UIC students exemplified between them a striking difference we found on the generation gap in religion. We will call them Bill and Kim. Both were raised United Methodist but only Kim still embraced his parents' religion as a college sophomore, whereas Bill, a junior, had left the church and religion altogether after a period of searching. Both were raised in the Chicago metropolitan area, but Kim was Korean American whereas Bill was European American, what we call "white." In this particular focus group (held three years ago), four of the eight young men were European American and four were Asian American (Chinese, Filipino, and Korean). All eight had been raised in Christian families (three Protestant and five Catholic), but the Asian American students stood out for their enthusiasm about their faith; all four were involved both in campus religious fellowships as well as in their parents' churches. By contrast, two of the four white students no longer identified with their parents' religion, one still went through the motions, and only one was actively extending his faith into new terrain. From their conversation, it seemed that the least religious Asian American student was as much involved with religion as the most religious of the white students. Thus, the specific contrast between Bill and Kim dramatizes the general difference between our Asian and white college students.

Let us bear in mind that most of today's immigrant children grow up preferring English, even when their parents' command of English is much less secure. Even as many Korean-American youth have at best a shaky command of Korean, many middle-aged Korean Americans speak heavily accented, unidiomatic English. Partly for that reason many of them make their living in small business despite the professional credentials they earned in Korea. Among middle-aged people of our acquaintance, mostly white folks, it is not uncommon for parents to ask their teenage children to teach them how to use the computer or VCR that just came into the household. But among immigrants, it is not unheard of for parents to ask their children to interpret their report cards. The cultural generation gap that many European Americans feel is more like a chasm among Asian Americans.

Despite this, listen to what Bill and Kim had to say about their religion when they introduced themselves to the others in the focus group (we have changed a few incidental details to protect their privacy):

Bill: I m Bill. I m a major in sociology. I was brought up Methodist, and I ve

gone through many different religions. I went to a Buddhist temple for a while, and I've experimented a great deal. Presently I renounce all religions.

Kim: My name is Kim. I'm a chem major, a sophomore. I grew up in the suburbs and I was basically raised in the church, every Sunday and every Friday, and I still actively practice my faith. [Moderator: What denomination?] United Methodist.

Later on, Bill elaborated on his period of religious experimentation, a time of searching for a religious community that he could unite with, before his decision to renounce all of them. For his part, Kim told about his new involvement with an activist and charismatic-flavored campus ministry, becoming more involved with Christian faith both on campus and his parents' church. Both having been raised Methodist, Bill and Kim had gone in radically divergent directions.

Still later in the discussion, our moderator acknowledged that many of the participants had reported times of doubt of their inherited religion (doubts that for some students had been the beginning of the end of their churchgoing). She then asked how their parents would deal with their doubts. Here's what our two protagonists said about their parents:

Bill: They didn't say anything useful. Something that I was constantly confronted with was the notion that >Oh, we've been there before. We've experienced all the doubt you're experiencing. There's nothing unique about it. Which, you know, I think is blatantly false.

Kim: If I were just going through a doubting phase, they wouldn't take much worry about that because I'm sure they know doubting is a very natural part of the process of growing. I don't think they would worry. But if I just stood up and renounced my faith completely, that's a different situation. My mom would just flat out start crying to my dad, and they would probably go on a thirty-day fast or something.

Kim takes for granted that his parents would understand him and his religious concerns, even if he might upset them. Bill thinks his parents could have "nothing useful" to communicate, even if he would annoy them. Kim is sure they "know" doubt is normal. Bill thinks their assurance that they know what he's going through is false. But neither son was a carbon copy of the parents. Although a less radical change than Bill's apostasy, Kim's enthusiastic style of religiosity at college was quite different from his parents' more somber Korean Methodism.

These contrasting perceptions of what parents might have to share religiously with their children are reflected in the dif-

ferent views the two young men have of their parents' own faith, varying from deep respect to something bordering on contempt.

Kim: When I look at my parents, I respect them so much because of their faith. I think that their faith is so much greater than mine. When they see me making progress with my faith, they're really excited. They always brought me up with the mentality that more than anything else, I have to get my relationship with God right. This translated to schoolwork, other things like that. There's no acceptable reason for me to miss church.

Bill: When you talk to my family now, they talk a lot about Christian values. But they never really had a profound faith. They seemed to be more materialists than spiritually oriented. I thought that they were--I still think they are inconsistent in their beliefs. They don't even seem to be Christians to me. [Moderator: How come?] Because both of them believe that the story of Jesus is just a metaphor. They don't believe in heaven or hell, they basically don't believe any of the metaphysical doctrine of the church--well, the Methodist church. All they believe in is morality, which makes them good people but I wouldn't say that they are Christians.

Kim looks up to his parents' faith, Bill looks down on his. These attitudes, in turn, seem rooted in the differences in religious upbringing Bill and Kim report. Here they talk about being young people in their respective churches:

Bill: I went on some retreats with my church, but they always seemed kind of a joke because it was in high school and junior high and everyone was more concerned with who's dating who and who has a crush on who than on our relationship with God. The religion was just a side note.

Kim: I had a youth group teacher I really looked up to because he was a college person, and he spent a lot of time working with us and hanging out with us and showing us not just how to live but how to live as a Christian. I went on a couple of mission trips led by him, and he got really specific in trying to correct certain things about the way I live.

Their contrasting recollections of things at home are consonant with their differing experiences in church:

Bill: It [religion] always seemed very hollow in my house. I wanted to know the big questions, like why does the earth exist, and things like that. Even though religion is supposed to deal with those issues, they [his parents] never really dealt with them.

Kim: Ever since I was really little, four or five, and we had days off school, my mom--before she went to work--would wake me up, and told me I had to memorize a passage of the Bible, or something like that, by the time she got back. It was that kind of influence from when I was really young my mom always encouraged me to read the

bible and we would have family prayer meetings and things like that. They would make us wake up for morning prayer at 5:30 in the morning on holidays, so there was a very strong Christian presence.

What Bill and Kim perceive as, respectively, a "hollow joke" and a "strong presence" of religion in their upbringing has stayed with them in college. Far from it being the case that the non-dogmatic religion of Bill's parents has freed him to chart his own religious course, Bill is not only alienated from the Methodist church, but cannot find satisfaction in any other religion. Having searched through several religions in search of a community to care about, he always finds himself out of phase with their beliefs, having left his latest "system of symbols" just "a few weeks ago." By contrast, Kim "started developing a lot of my thoughts" after coming to college because his two roommates were Anon-Christians." He went on:

Kim: They [the roommates] started raising a lot of questions I'd never even thought about asking because there was never a time to ask those questions. So basically within the last two years, I have been reading a lot more, reading the Bible a lot more, reading other books, just thinking. In high school, I just kind of went along, but as soon as I got my roommates and things like that, that's when I had to start going more into depth. Ever since I got into college, my Christian experiences have been taken to another level.

College graduation is properly called "commencement," so it is not the case that college students' not infrequent alienation from religion is the end of their religious lives. As one of the young men said in another of our focus groups, "I was brought up Catholic, but I'm an atheist at the current time. . . . I just choose not to believe right now." He knew things could change. Even now, three years later, Bill may have found faith. Kim may have lost his. Yet as we leave Kim and Bill, Kim has grown in faith after coming to college with a firm foundation. With little faith foundation, Bill has not yet found the religious community to which he would be willing to commit himself.

Questions for Discussion

Which child-parent combination, Kim and his parents or Bill and his, live in the most separate worlds? Which parents are more likely to have experienced what their children go through in high school? How can parents let their children know they empathize without trivializing their children's sense of unique experience?

Why does Kim respect his parents' religion while Bill does not?
How much has to do with church? how much to do with home?

Is it reasonable to compare the situation of white Protestant families to that of Asian American Protestant families? If they are incommensurable, how much has to do with culture and language and how much with "race"?

How many of the youth in your congregation do you suppose would look at their parents' religion the way Bill does? the way Kim does?

What kinds of issues do you think could be spoken of in Kim's United Methodist youth group? How about Bill's?

How important is it to explain religious beliefs to children? What about them? At what ages?

How important is it to share religious practices with children? which ones? a what ages?

How many parents in your congregation say that they want their children to be free to choose their own religion when they grow up? What do you say to them?

Thinking of Bill and Kim today, 3 years after we spoke with them, when they've probably finished college, where do you think they are religiously and spiritually?